The New Criterion

April 2004

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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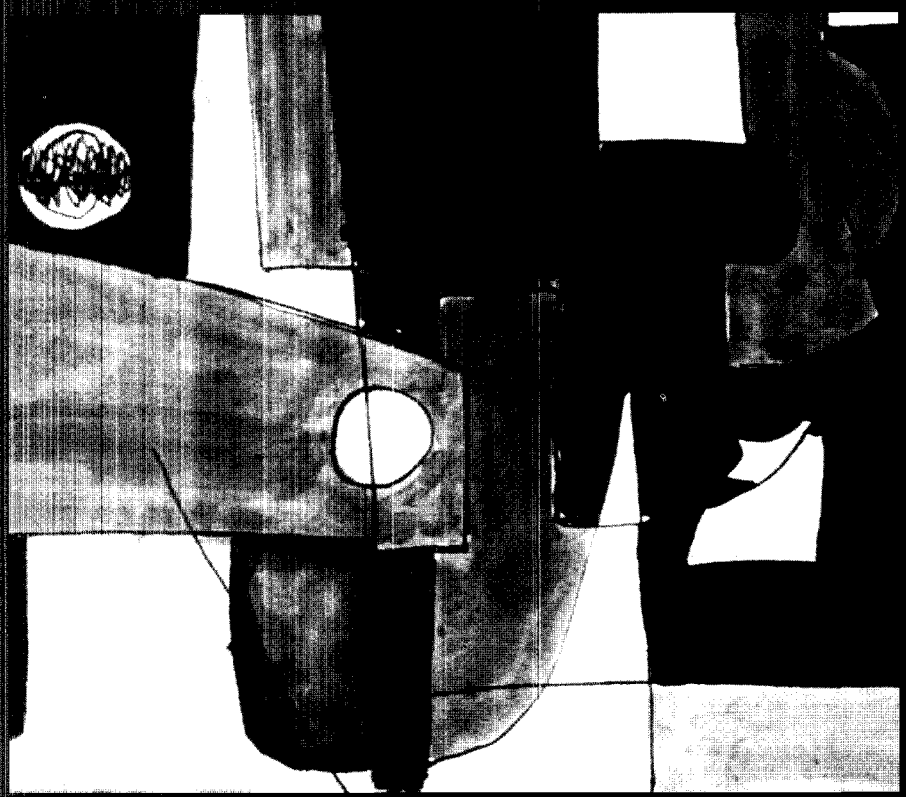

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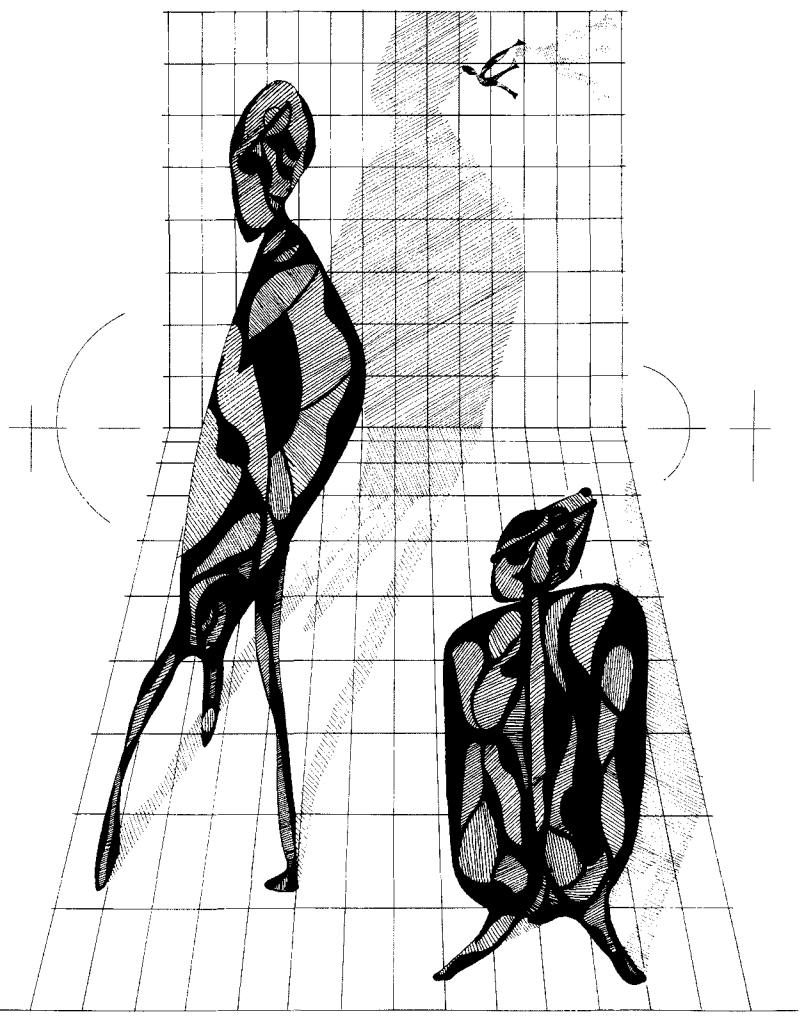

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Notes & Comments: April 2004

"Neville again"

The despicable bombings by the Muslim jihadists in Madrid on March 11 claimed 200 lives (and wounded another 1400); they also formed a prelude to the most important event in international politics since September 11, 2001. For, horrible though that cold-blooded murder of innocent people was, its significance was dwarfed by what happened in Spain a few days later. Timed to coincide with the Spanish national election, the terrorist attack by al Qaeda achieved its desired effect, which was only incidentally the slaughter of a couple hundred infidels. The deeper aim was to interfere in the course of the electoral process of a Western democratic country, and that —thanks to the cravenness of the Spanish electorate—the Muslim fundamentalists did decisively. On March 10, the center-right candidate José María Aznar was universally favored to win. Come March 15, the Socialist candidate José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero swept into office on a platform of anti-Americanism and hostility to George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and the war in Iraq.

The Spanish people were duly rewarded for their compliance. As Andrew Sullivan noted, one radical Muslim group announced that it would

> cease operations in Spain to reward Spanish voters for striking a blow against "the axis of Crusader evil." There's a catch, of course. Here's part of the statement: "Because of this [electoral] decision, the leadership has decided to stop all operations within the Spanish territories . . . until we know the intentions of the new government that has promised to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq. And we repeat this to all the brigades present in European lands: stop all operations." They've learned something, haven't they?

Indeed, they learned the same thing that Hitler learned when he remilitarized the Rhineland, absorbed Austria, and gobbled up Czechoslovakia. Push and they will capitulate. Bottom line: the Spanish rejection of Aznar was not merely a shameful capitulation to terrorism. It was also a death warrant for—how many do you suppose? —hundreds? thousands? of other Europeans who will surely be targeted by al Qaeda in an effort to blackmail Western countries.

In a characteristically astute observation on the Spanish debacle, Mark Steyn noted that the slogan "Never again," formulated after the Holocaust, has mutated into its opposite: "Neville again," a reprise of Neville Chamberlain at Munich. What we see across Europe now is an orgy of capitulation. In a letter in the London *Times*, one Peter Goodchild wrote that "History shows that only two strategies have any real effect in dealing with terrorists: negotiation and extirpation."

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Since Western democracies are "squeamish about the ruthless measures" needed to pursue the second option, they inevitably drift toward the first without really embracing it. Mr. Goodchild seemed to advocate a wholehearted pursuit of negotiation. But negotiating with terrorists—at least with what Ralph Peters calls "apocalyptic terrorists" like al Qaeda—is tantamount to calling your funeral director and asking for an immediate pick up. Hussein Massawi, a former Hezbollah leader, put it with admirable clarity: "We are not fighting so that you will offer us something. We are fighting to eliminate you." Worth bearing in mind, isn't it?

It's always worse than you think

UK division

We have always fondly thought of England as at least the slightly more vigilant partner when it came to preserving propriety, respecting tradition, and resisting change undertaken merely for the sake of change. A recent visit to London has made us reconsider. One of the first things to greet us was a headline in *The Daily Telegraph*: "Yet another Labour snub to the Queen." Actually, there were two snubs. The first was the decision—taken by the Labour government without consulting Buckingham Palace—to drop the word "Crown" from the Crown Prosecution Service. The second snub was the decision to rename "Her Majesty's Prison Service" the "National Offenders' Management Service." No, we are not making this up. In part, of course, both renamings are part of the Labour government's not-so-subtle efforts to abolish Britain's Constitutional Monarchy by erasing its stamp from more and more public institutions. But replacing "Prison Service" with "Offenders' Management Service" is not an anti-monarchical gesture so much as a politically correct one. It is exactly the sort of thing that George Orwell would have savored as a specimen piece of Newspeak—before, that is, he savaged it as an insidious euphemism designed to increase state control by redescribing its activities in bureaucratic psychobabble. With the phrase "Prison Service" we know where we are—in the legal realm of specific crimes and corresponding punishment. But substitute "Offenders'" for "Prison" and where are we? In that Kafkaesque realm where yesterday's innocuous remark is tomorrow's punishable outrage. Already "racism" and "xenophobia" have been designated crimes by Europe's masters in Brussels: how much easier to handle such amorphous torts when criminals are rebaptized "offenders" who in turn are no longer "punished" but merely "managed," like the cattle, the sheep, that so much of Europe's populace is eagerly striving to become.

Alas, *The Telegraph* does not merely report on the degradation of English life, it also abets it. In the special Arts and Books section for the Saturday paper on March 6, for example, readers were treated to a long, wandering piece of hagiography about the pop singer Morrissey. Reprinted from *The London Review of Books*, the essay by Andrew O'Hagan is a trashy paean to trash culture.

> I used to know a girl called Fiona who kept a joint diary with her friend Katherine. They wrote it most evenings in the desolate hours between the end of John Craven's *Newsround* and the arrival of the ice-cream van in their housing estate, a period marked by the combustion of chip pans in the kitchens of the negligent, and then carried hurriedly on to doorsteps and thrown into the air like torches at a Viking funeral.

O'Hagan goes on to eulogize Morrissey, who "knew how to hate Margaret Thatcher and the Royal Family," and who "had built a career encountering and dramatising his own maladjustment."

This is precisely the sort of vulgar rubbish one expects to find in pop magazines—but *The Daily Telegraph*? *The London Review of Books*? The former is Britain's most respect-

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ed conservative broadsheet. The latter is as reliably left-wing as its model, *The New York Review of Books*. But what does it mean that these bastions of high- or at least middle-brow culture should stoop to the gutter of mind-numbing pop fandom?

It's the sheer vulgarity of the piece that is so depressing—a vulgarity that more and more seems to characterize daily life in London. Fortunately, there is still Oxbridge, the great universities with their many centuries of tradition, their commitment to the life of the mind, their still-cloistered detachment from the hurly-burly of pop culture. Consider Cambridge University, where a group of female students, led by a second-year theology student, used university funds to start a group called "Fellowship of the Pole" and hire a stripper to teach them the ins and outs of erotic "pole dancing." The students intend to use—indeed, apparently already have used—their newly developed skills to supplement their incomes in a local night-club. According to the London *Times*, Nadia Messaoud, the theology student from Queens' College,

> hopes that her group of pole dancers will be recognised as an official university organisation, alongside the tiddlywinks and bell-ringing societies. "It is art, just the same as ballet, tap or any other kind of dance," Ms. Messaoud said. "Cambridge is definitely getting sexier and pole dancing is just a part of this."

Ms. Messaoud reported that her parents were "100 percent" supportive of her new avocation. Should we be outraged or merely depressed?

US division

Speaking of depression, it is good to know that campuses in the US are doing their bit to keep up with their British counterparts. A friend recently sent along a notice from the University of Chicago announcing a conference on "Depression: What Is It Good For?" "Co-Sponsored by the Arts Planning Council, *Critical Inquiry*, the Franke Institute for the Humanities, and the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago," this event is intended to address the following:

> Is disempowerment the only prognosis for the depressed? Is the goal to "get happy"? This conference asks how we might use the experience of depression as the very index of our current political climate and as a key to future political thinking. We suspect that depression in its many forms has come to suffuse the daily lives and endeavors of a wide range of people, generating important social and political effects. In a time of economic downturns (no longer referred to as "depressions"), corporate and political scandals, rising fundamentalisms, capitalism's "triumph," the expansion of the security state and increasing threats to civil liberties, can depression be used politically?

"Can depression be used politically?" How depressing can things get? Perhaps pole dancing is not so bad after all.

Frederick Morgan, 1922–2004

It is with great sadness that we note the passing of Frederick Morgan, a longstanding friend of and contributor to *The New Criterion*. He will be well known to our readers: his poems appeared often in our pages, though not as often as we might have liked.

Fred Morgan managed to have three distinguished literary careers. The first was as an editor and (using the term in the highest sense) literary impresario, someone who brings literary talent to the attention of the public. In 1948, shortly after having been graduated from Princeton, Fred started *The Hudson Review* with his college friends Joseph Bennett and William Arrowsmith,

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the well-known classicist and translator. The moment had found its men. The world was bursting with literary talent and *The Hudson Review*—that is, Fred Morgan and his colleagues—had the wit to discern and the charm to attract some of the best. The roster of contributors to the quarterly in its early years reads like a literary Who's Who of the period: not just T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and Robert Graves, but also Wallace Stevens, Dylan Thomas, and Theodore Roethke. Eudora Welty and Sylvia Plath published in *The Hudson Review*, and so did Thomas Mann, John Dos Passos, e.e. cummings, and R. P. Blackmur. It was an extraordinary editorial performance, not so much eclectic (which implies a certain lack of direction) as wide-ranging, non-ideological, focused above all on literary interest and intellectual distinction.

In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, Fred also published some excellent literary criticism himself, carving out a quiet but distinguished niche as a literary critic of exacting standards and penetrating observation. By the mid-1960s, Bennett and Arrowsmith had left *The Hudson Review*. Fred carried on and was joined by Paula Deitz, his collaborator, later his wife and co-editor, who has been editor-in-chief of *The Hudson Review* since Fred's retirement a few years ago.

Fred did not publish much of his own poetry before the age of fifty, but once he started he made up for lost time. From the early 1970s until his death in February, he published some ten volumes. His *Poems: New and Selected*, published in 1987, solidified his reputation as one of the most accomplished American poets of his generation. Fred's language tended to be spare, his manner decorous, his matter oscillating between a kind of commemorative eroticism and a certain species of generous though cheerfully disabused meditation. He was a man of deep feeling but equally deep reserve. The result was a poetry of lapidary understatement and keen, immaculately modulated emotion.

Fred wrote many sorts of poems: love poems, celebrations of nature, elegies for the death of loved ones. Among our favorites are what might be described as existential observations: dry, quiet, deep in their confident simplicity. One such poem, read aloud at Fred's funeral, is "The Step":

> From where you are at any moment you
> may step off into death.
> Is it not a clinching thought?
> I do not mean a stoical bravado
> of making the great decision blade in hand
> but the awareness, all so simple, that
> right in the middle of the day
> you may be called to an adjoining room.

A clinching thought, indeed: hardly novel, but how regularly neglected. It was part of Fred's genius to remind us tactfully of what we meant to remember but were too lazy or too distracted to heed. Farewell, Fred. We shall miss you.

The New Criterion *on poetry*

It is sadly appropriate that our memorial for Fred Morgan should coincide with what has become an annual event in our publishing schedule: a special issue focusing on poetry. We are pleased that David Yezzi, a former Associate Editor of *The New Criterion* and now the director of the Unterberg Poetry Center at the 92nd Street Y, has returned to edit the poetry and the essays on poetry that we feature in this issue. In addition, we are proud to publish Eric Ormsby's brilliant reflections on the institution of poetry as part of our year-long series, "Lengthened Shadows: America and Its Institutions in the Twenty-first Century." It pleases us to think that Fred Morgan would have delighted in this celebration of and admonition about American poetry.

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Lengthened shadows: VIII

Of lapdogs & loners: American poetry today

by Eric Ormsby

When I was eight years old, and living with my grandmother near Miami, I received a copy of Walter Scott's book-length poem *Marmion* for my birthday. Perhaps my grandmother, English-born and raised in Victorian times, remembered the custom she and her sisters had of reading poetry aloud on winter evenings in those distant days when poetry was written to give pleasure; perhaps she even hoped that the book would persuade me to introduce my scruffy pals to the joys of verse. Not likely: this wasn't a gift calculated to thrill a boy already addicted to the pleasures of snake- and turtle-hunting in the Everglades, and tactfully I shunted it to the side. One day not long after, however, perhaps disappointed in my quarry, I picked the book up and began to read, drawn initially by the old steel engravings and the strange ticklish scent of the stiffly glazed pages. To my own considerable surprise I was hooked like one of my own terrapins after a stanza or two and read the verse-saga through from beginning to end. The forceful rhythms of the lines held me at first as much as the stirring tale:

> The guards their morrice-pikes advanced,
> The trumpets flourished brave,
> The cannon from the ramparts glanced,
> And thundering welcome gave.
> A blithe salute, in martial sort,
> The minstrels well might sound,
> For, as Lord Marmion crossed the court,
> He scattered angels round.

Powerful stuff, this, for an eight-year-old (even now, I confess, quaint and outmoded though Scott's manner may be, the verses can tingle my blood). For weeks I perched on our balcony in the blazing sun and declaimed whole stanzas to indifferent mockingbirds. I was drunk on the language which struck me then as valorous and charged in a way I couldn't comprehend. Tennyson, Wordsworth, Keats, and Shakespeare, and others, followed soon after, but I have never forgotten that first impression which Scott's poem made on my childish sensibility. This experience was what I think of as my "*Marmion* moment," and it doesn't matter that the poem which inspired it no longer seems to me especially good or even memorable. I was infected, deliciously so, by the poetry bug, and to this day I haven't recovered from its bite.

I mention this because I believe that it is from such early encounters with the magic of words that a sense not merely of the intoxicating effects of language but of the secret power of poetry itself takes root; and furthermore, that the encounter is replicated and repeated in a thousand different guises when we read poetry later in life. It is a sense of privileged intimacy, of delectable secrecy, which everyone who loves to read seeks to recover and prolong. In my own, no doubt partial, view, the experience occurs and recurs in its most concentrated form in the encounter with poetry.

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Anyone who comes to love poetry from childhood as a pleasure in itself and who tries later, however hesitantly, to write it—who tries, that is, to recreate that pleasure in others which one received oneself as a reader—knows the strange almost trance-like sense of interior expansiveness which the effort can induce. How harsh then and unsettling the encounter with what is commonly called "the world of poetry" later proves to be! By "world of poetry" I mean the entire edifice of poetry as transaction: the magazines and publishing houses, the foundations, academies, and societies, the prizes and awards and fellowships, the workshops, the conferences, the colloquia, the cabals, and the covens. "The world of poetry is so *tiny*!" a distinguished editor once exclaimed to me. Not tiny enough, I thought. She meant, of course, that the networks, affiliations, lines of patronage, and so forth, were so closely and jealously monitored by those involved that the faintest ripple of repute in one corner would almost instantaneously produce a bulge of envy in another.

The institutions in North America that seek to sustain and promote poetry strive mainly to buoy up this factitious but not insignificant "world," however tiny it might be. And the shadows that they cast, while ever lengthening, are neither healing nor apostolic but thin and chill. By this I do not mean that foundations such as the Guggenheim or prizes such as the Pulitzer or any of the sundry emoluments, accolades, or entitlements which they confer are intrinsically, or even wholly, malign; but rather, that they exist to serve poetry as a purely exterior endeavor. They exist principally not to encourage or inspire the composition of great poems but mainly, and unashamedly, to further careers. (I cannot think of a single example of a grant or an award or a prize leading to the creation of a poem, or book of poems, that promises to have lasting value.) There is of course nothing wrong with poetry as a career, except that it rarely has anything to do with poetry as such, in its innermost essence. Poetry that has a chance of lasting arises from a sense of vocation. While a genuine vocation may coincide with a career, and often has (think of Edna St. Vincent Millay or Elizabeth Bishop), it is something quite different from, and fundamentally incompatible with, that "world of poetry" which institutions sustain.

The continuing institutionalization of poetry in North America with its concomitant proliferation of writing workshops, professorial positions, validating agencies, and award-giving bodies, not to mention such pointless offices as that of Poet Laureate, has had a stultifying effect on the creation of good poetry over the last few decades that has often been noted, sometimes by poets themselves. This isn't very surprising. After all, if you're writing in the hope of winning an award, you are liable to tailor your composition to prevailing tastes. This may account at least in part for the weird sameness of tone of so many contemporary poems. If I had to choose a single term to characterize this tone, I would be compelled to identify earnestness as its overriding trait.

Earnestness is a splendid virtue; while essential to social workers and scoutmasters, it is, however, of limited value to poets who usually prove to be better writers when they are shifty, unscrupulous, and shamelessly insincere—in matters, that is, unconnected with their craft. Earnestness, by contrast, deadens; it homogenizes the sentiments; it may flirt with irony but never dangerously so; it subordinates magic to agenda; it seeks to please rather than to charm; it hankers after acceptance and respectability, however much it may squawk the opposite—and was any great or good poem ever truly respectable?

It would be easy enough to pack this essay with examples of earnestness in current American verse. When Marilyn Hacker, a fine translator and sometimes quite fine sonneteer, writes, "I need transmission fluid for the brain," we are in the Land of Dreadful Earnestness. When the former Poet Laureate Robert Hass can begin a poem by writing

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> You think you've grown up in various ways
> and then the elevator door opens and you're
> standing inside
> reaming out your nose

we feel a clammy pall of sincerity settling over our hapless shoulders. Even though Hass wants to be coyly self-deprecating ("What, me, a *laureate*, picking his nose in public?"), the earnestness bores through. When I read this and similar stuff, I long for the frivolous days of Ogden Nash and Dorothy Parker who were as adroit as they were malicious, and funny to boot. If I limit myself to a few such representative instances of poetic asininity, it is not solely to poke fun (though I see nothing wrong with that). Earnestness has other more damaging consequences—a vitiation of language, a renunciation of playfulness, a tinny solemnity—that do not bode well for the future of our verse. "Ogden, thou should'st be living at this hour!"

The Poet Laureateship of the United States—recently rechristened the Poet Laureate/Consultant for some reason—represents earnestness incarnate. The pay is modest, the duties undefined; even so, there seems to be any number of eager aspirants to this quaintly archaic position, as if the official honor paid to poetry stood in inverse ratio to its actual importance in the world today. We might as well, I suppose, have an official lutenist while we're at it for all the significance poetry possesses for the U.S. Congress (to whom the laureate is answerable).

Equally puzzling is the ambition recent poets laureate have nourished to evangelize poetry among the populace. With grim determination, like Nurse Ratchets killing with kindness, they have sought to spoon the tonic of poesy down the reluctant throats of the public. One of the kookiest proposals—surely this was not made seriously?—was to distribute collections of poetry to hotels and motels across the land in place of the good old Gideon Bibles. Another was to make books of poems available near the check-out counters of supermarkets and department stores. Now be honest: When faced with the choice between Rita Dove's *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* or the latest issue of *The Star* with its screaming headline "Bat Child Found Living in Cave," which would you go for?

At least in England, where the laureateship means something, the Queen provides the laureate with a goodly stock of wine once a year; a case of Jim Beam might do wonders for our own laureates, if only to loosen them up a bit. There is something inherently foolish about a kept bard; a court jester without the jokes (or the court). Of course, we cannot expect that our laureates will soon be penning triumphal odes on the entry of the U.S. Army into Baghdad; though minions of the Administration, they are more likely to be picketing their own offices. But couldn't they at least grind out a villanelle or two for the First Lady's birthday or finesse a limerick for the Speaker of the House? Instead, our laureates seem bent on proving their entrepreneurship in the deluded hope of making poetry genuinely popular. Beyond the implausibility of this project, it strikes me as fundamentally misguided. I find myself, somewhat improbably, in agreement with the poet Richard Howard who noted in a talk, later published as "The Ghettoization of Poetry," that the reading of poetry is essentially a private and intimate experience. Public events, such as the tiresome "Poetry Month" (April really is the cruellest month), offer little more than lip-service to an art that has no genuine significance in the lives of most Americans.

Given that we're stuck with this odd office, and now that the jocular Billy Collins has been succeeded by the lugubrious Louise Glück, perhaps a more radical approach is finally in order. How astonishing, and genuinely exemplary, it would be, for instance, if the poet laureate were to sit firmly in her office, sustained by her stipend and the uncountable resources of the Library of Congress, and—write poetry? Wouldn't one good poem, or even a single slim book of

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good poems resulting from a year of subsidized toil, make it all worthwhile and serve as a better example than the ponderous readings and twittering tea parties and marketing campaigns now so much in vogue?

A bizarre corollary of the laureateship is the delusional sense of self-importance the position appears to confer on certain of its occupiers, often long after they have left office. The former laureate Rita Dove offers a cautionary instance of this tendency. Originally a poet of modest promise, whose best collection is still probably *Thomas and Beulah* (1987), she now produces this kind of stuff:

> Joe takes after Mama.
> Joe's Mr. Magoo.
> Joe
> thinks, half
> dreaming, if he ever finds
> a place where he can think,
> he'd stop clowning
> and drinking and then that wife
> of his would quit
> sending prayers through the chimney.

One consequence of her protracted laureateship has been Dove's exalted view of herself as a "role model" for others. This is a responsibility she claims to take with the utmost earnestness. Thus, in an interview she gave in 2002 to one Earl G. Ingersoll, she remarked:

> How does it feel to be a role model? That one's difficult because I have to build in disclaimers about what people consider role models to be and how I define a role model. Newspapers don't want to hear it; but the fact is, I think one's role models should be everyday people, the people you see living life minute-by-minute, because that's how you live your life. You don't live your life in the limelight; you don't live your life in sound bites or a brief interview. But that's what's seen when you look at the role models kids have today.

These are reasonable comments but are belied by Dove's incessant self-publicity. By her own relentless puffery, and that of others (Helen Vendler in particular), Rita Dove has been transmogrified into a kind of monstrous caricature of a poet. Like La Fontaine's frog that longed to turn into an ox and ended up by exploding, Dove has been expanding relentlessly until she has reached the limits of what a single fragile human ego can possibly contain. The poetry in the meantime has ended up as the tinsel on the float. Sad to say, the whole ghastly process has been doggedly documented by her own husband, the obscure German novelist Fred Viebahn, who every year issues his notorious *Dove–Viebahn Newsletter*. "Fred's Annual Letter," as he fondly dubs it on the masthead, is one of those embarrassing circular letters self-infatuated families love to send out at Christmas to stupefied friends ("Estelle is starting harp lessons in the fall"), but it is, if I may say so, the Mother of all Holiday Letters.

"The world of poetry is so tiny*!" a distinguished editor once exclaimed to me. Not tiny enough, I thought.*

A monument to what another of its ardent fans terms "gloating self-regard," the newsletter, replete with publicity photos and side-bars, positively brims with braggadocio, not solely about Rita and Fred but about their strenuously over-achieving daughter, Aviva. Significantly, the many pages of self-praise never turn on poetry which is rarely mentioned except as the occasion for some accolade, however minor. Instead, the names of celebrities, or would-be ones, are dropped with dogged abandon, as when Rita is summoned—"yet again!"—to trip the cha-cha with "Bill" on the presidential patio. ("'Well,' a Washington establishment lady at the next table said to Rita with ill-concealed cattiness, 'I guess you must be somebody!'" For once the in-

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trepid Fred fails to get her name. *Quandoque bonus dormitat Viebahnus!*) At the same time, no distinction is too trifling to escape mention. Thus, Rita is inducted into the American Academy of Achievement, whatever that is, or attends the "Poetry Africa" festival "in the province of KwaZulu-Natal on the Indian Ocean," and still manages to fit in "a splendid Argentinean tango-paso doble combination at the local medal ball." Wherever he travels, Fred is like a celebrity-seeking missile and rarely hits a name he cannot drop. Viebahn may know the German proverb *Selbstlob stinkt* ("Self-praise stinks") but clearly he doesn't subscribe to it.

I'm all for poets tripping the light fantastic, even at the White House (and have been known to foot a mean cha-cha myself, albeit in less august surroundings), and I don't in the slightest begrudge this merry couple their social whirl. Nevertheless, the obsessive detail and wide distribution of the newsletter—it is sent not solely to family and friends but to literary magazines nationwide—say something alarming about what a very visible poet considers important in the end. How does this square with Dove's commitment to poetry, to which she presumably still pays lip-service, and how can it be reconciled with her solemn sense of herself as a role model? I have a pretty good idea of what "the kids" for whom she professes such concern will think when they witness the disparity between her formal pronouncements and "Fred's Annual Letter." In the end, the newsletter is not merely a laughable if unwitting exposé of the perils of self-importance, it also illustrates, better than anything I could invent, that externalized, transactional "world of poetry" which is the diametric opposite of everything genuine that poetry, and an authentic life in poetry, stands for.

Herbert Morris is not, thank God, a celebrity; the dust jackets of his four books of poetry carry neither photo nor biography. Whether this is from modesty or reclusiveness I have no idea, and yet he is writing some of the best work to emerge in North America in recent decades. His most recent collection, *What Was Lost* (Counterpoint), contains fifteen poems, every one of which merits reading and re-reading. I have admired his work since *Peru*, his first book, appeared in 1983, and while not all his books are of equal strength, he remains one of the subtlest and most original of poets. Though he favors the dramatic or interior monologue, Morris is difficult to categorize. Eschewing rhyme and metaphor, his verse gives an unadorned impression; at the same time, it is musical and densely textured. His true Penelope, we might say, is Henry James, and, like James, he accumulates clauses within clauses, like some sly lasso virtuoso, to achieve his unusual effects, at once Ciceronian and Prufrockian. Overlapping repetitions, variations on phrases, spilling rivulets of hesitancy and asseveration, lend serpentine momentum to his lines. The result is a kind of verbal impasto which, fused with an uncanny ear for cadences, creates an incantatory, rather mesmerizing pattern.

In *What Was Lost*, there are at least two masterpieces, the opening poem, "House of Words," in Henry James's voice, and "To Baden," a long, strange, hypnotic poem in thirty-eight strict five-line stanzas. The first of these traces what the speaker calls "intimations of extreme dislocation," arising from a dreamed visit to James at Lamb House, his residence in Rye, by the "handsome, stylish" portrait photographer Alvin Landon Coburn (one of whose beautiful prints adorns the dust jacket). These intimations are of words not spoken or spoken wrongly, of gestures too ambiguous or hesitant, of vacillations and second-thoughts, of what-might-have-been or still-might-be, that whole restless penumbra of an exquisitely questioning and baffled consciousness which James himself was so skilled at adumbrating. The poem is full of what James termed "glimmerings," as in the following passage:

> I, who had always held himself apart,
> had cause to hold himself apart, from crowds,
> others en masse, I who had found himself
> never less than reluctant to plunge in,

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to brave the onslaught of that tide, that wave,
more than hesitant to immerse oneself
in currents likely to sweep one far out,
that turbulence which raged past one's control,
that chaos from which there seems no way back;
I, finder of refuge, maker of refuge,
in words, whose life, indeed, was spun of
words,
spun and respun, spun once more, then respun,
a life which has itself become a refuge
(words, in a world bordered by blood, on one
side,
by the tumult of passion on the other;
the thinness, yes, the thinness of one's life:
what has one built if not a house of words?;
what can one's life have been said to have come
to?).

Morris's qualities cannot be captured in excerpts, but this one does at least demonstrate how accurately he catches James's voice, as well as the cumulative force his variations weave. For all its understatement, the poem is piercing and vastly sad.

"To Baden" is quite another matter. In contradistinction to "House of Words" with its anguished, almost paralyzed meditation, this is a racehorse of a poem and never stops (*Marmion* certainly never hit these speeds). Drawn from a whimsical subject—the nineteenth-century aristocratic habit of sending servants out at night on horseback to bring back *Spanischbrotli*, a "butter-rich pastry," from Baden—the poem proceeds at a breathless and terrifying gallop from start to finish. Here's how it begins:

Into the dark to Baden, then, if need be,
now, or the moment just before, but hurry,
lest mood shift, need diminish, alteration
insinuate its presence, light change, time pass,
education, somewhere, at last, begin,

never looking back, never asking why—
and to what avail, what, to look, to ask,
to know, or hope to know, initiate
an approach to some fixed, ultimate
knowledge,
hard-won, if won at all, of what it was.

There is something at once ludicrous and desperate in this urge for pastry at midnight, but it gives the poem its compelling drive:

Marta, time, it is time, such longing flays us
as one cannot depict, and all for pastry;

but be warned, take fair caution: each step,
misstep,
skirts disaster, ground shifts, the route
meanders,
footing turns treacherous, in due course,
worse,
and the delicate, hand-turned crusts, their
perfume
carrying through the depths of unmapped
woods,

break at a touch, less than that, crumble,
shatter.

Anyone who has ever yearned to live next to an all-night *Konditerei* will savor this poem which is, of course, about much more than *Spanischbrotli*, those "infinite kneadings, rich drenched butterings" (though, to Morris's credit, it is very much about them too). The poem is about seizing an instant, or an impulse (already forever lost); it is about seizing life itself, at the apogee of its intensity, as opposed to "the long, slow settling in, the making do."

Morris has the rare knack of making a *tour de force* such as "To Baden" more than a mere display of ingenuity; its absurd momentum grips us even as we acknowledge the absurdity, for it is the momentum of all our longings.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle identified a gift for metaphor as the defining mark of a poet of genius. But metaphor demands a certain playfulness, and for the over-earnest, the ludic is a mode to be strenuously avoided. Nevertheless, when such figures do crop up in contemporary American poetry, they are often manhandled for lack of exactitude. A successful metaphor works or flops in accord with the precision of its affinity. This is

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not to invoke some hidebound set of rules. It's simply how metaphor operates. Two entities are brought into unexpected but just collocation on the basis of a quality, hidden or unsuspected, which they share. When Shakespeare writes "bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang," we respond to it because of a hitherto unnoticed common element—the famous *tertium quid*, or "third thing" of the rhetoricians—between winter trees and devastated chapels; call it songlessness or what you will.

Of course, a metaphor may consciously subvert its purpose. When André Breton says of his wife (in "L'Union libre")

> *Ma femme au sexe de placer et d'ornithorynque*
> (My wife with the sex of a vein of ore and a platypus)

we will not expect to find monotreme anatomy—or a gold mine—under Mme. Breton's svelte Chanel *tailleur*. That is the point: The *tertium quid* has been deliberately abolished to confound and startle our expectations. Such effects once seemed daring but have by now (I hope) run their course.

What I have in mind is something different and which seems alarmingly like a tendency: The proliferation not simply of bad images but of pseudo-metaphors, metaphors that through carelessness or imprecision miss the mark. My card-file runneth over, but I have space for two examples of such misfired metaphor. The first is, again, by Robert Hass, whose debut collection, *Field Guide*, still in print and still much admired, has exerted considerable influence since its publication in 1973. In a poem to his wife from that collection, Hass attempts a rare apostrophe that strains to be at once earnest and erotic (a combination without a future, I'd say). He exclaims, "O spider cunt, O raw devourer!" Now the phrase "spider cunt" does have a certain phonic piquancy with that long i arrested abruptly by the blunt u of "cunt." (We can ignore "O raw devourer" as a bit of sheer pubic persiflage.) But consider the comparison that is implicitly being made. Is there anything in common between a vagina and an arachnid? Eight legs? Multiple eyes? Are we witnessing here the rebirth of the long-discredited *vagina dentata*? Is his wife what the comic books call "a webslinger?" The verbal combination initially startles but ultimately fails because there is no affinity, however covert, between the two items brought into conjunction.

When faced with the choice between Rita Dove's On the Bus with Rosa Parks *or the latest issue of* The Star *with its screaming headline "Bat Child Found Living in Cave," which would you go for?*

Another example of inaccuracy in metaphoric language occurs in the work of the much-ballyhooed Anne Carson, a poet whose figurative imprecision is virtually the signature of her work. Whenever I try out the "Larkin Test" on her admirers, I always receive the same response. (The Larkin Test refers to the occasion when Margaret Thatcher told Philip Larkin how much she admired his verse and he responded, "Can you quote three lines?" She couldn't, but then the Iron Lady had other things on her mind.) Two examples are regularly adduced to illustrate Carson's lyric brilliance; one of these is the poem in which she repeats the word "river," and nothing else, some fifteen times—at least that's where I stopped counting—and the other is, without fail, "Praguing the eye." The use of a proper name in a verbal mode is nothing new in English poetry, of course, but it still elicits a mild surprise. What though does the phrase mean? Does it refer to the golden towers of the Prague skyline and the fabled splendor of an ancient city which illumines the gaze? Could it allude to the ubiquitous air pollution of Prague that stings the eye of every visitor? The answer, I suspect, is that it

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refers to all of these and to none of them. It's an ersatz metaphor without a third referent, not because the poet, in Surrealist fashion, wishes to jostle our expectations but, instead, because she means only to gauze them in shallow and gratuitous vagueness. It is both an ugly phrase to the ear and one that can denote anything you want while meaning nothing at all. When I asked a sophisticated friend what he made of it, he responded by asking, "What is *progging*?"

Earnestness can run amok at times and give way to zealotry. *Poets Against the War* (Thunder Mouth Press) may not be the worst collection of poems I have ever read —competitors abound—but it's definitely a top contender. It is edited by Sam Hamill, the poet, publisher, and translator who was instrumental last year in torpedoing a White House symposium, sponsored by the First Lady, to which a sampling of American poets had been invited. Hamill declined his invitation, patterning himself on Robert Lowell who refused to attend a similar White House event during the Vietnam War. Hamill's reasoning seems to have been that if he cannot hope to write like Robert Lowell, he can at least behave as badly. Lowell's refusal took no great courage and Hamill's took none. In a gratuitously churlish note he dedicates his anthology "For Laura Bush."

The present confection is a perfect illustration of André Gide's dictum that "it is with fine sentiments that bad literature is made." The collection offers not a single worthwhile poem; the only poems that stick in the mind do so because they are too fatuous to forget. But this is not merely bad poetry. It is bad poetry that positively suppurates self-righteousness. Worse, it is a deeply dishonest book.

Hamill affects a specious populism in his selections. The bulk of the anthology consists of work by unknown poets from all regions of the country. Hamill tells us that his website was deluged with 13,000 poems from 11,000 poets (ghastly statistic: I didn't know there were that many poets in world history, let alone in the U.S.). Out of these he selected just under 200; nevertheless, as he assures us, "there are, no doubt, innumerable jewels still to be found in the vaults of poetsagainstthewar.org." His reluctance to explore "the vaults" further is understandable, given what he has dragged out so far.

Our laureates seem bent on proving their entrepreneurship in the deluded hope of making poetry genuinely popular. Beyond the implausibility of this project, it strikes me as fundamentally misguided.

Each poet is furnished with a prefatory blurb indicating what part of America he or she hails from; the age of many is given, for reasons that escape me. Should we overlook the lame lines and spavined stanzas of Patricia Ikeda, forty-nine years old, and "a socially engaged Buddhist activist in the Bay Area" because she is over the hill? Or the appalling ear of William Irwin Thompson, a "semi-finalist for the National Book Award in 1972" (what is a "semi-finalist" anyway?), because he has reached the threshold of his dotage at sixty-seven? At least the seven-year-old second-grader Wilden McIntosh-Round can write a serviceable, if banal, declarative sentence: "Our earth was created for us to live in peace on," but who would call it poetry?

There are plenty of well-known names too, most of whom contribute utterly egregious twaddle (and all of whom withhold their ages). Thus, Robert Bly writes:

> We will have to call especially to reach
> Our angels, who are hard of hearing.

I suspect that at Bly's approach the "angels" switch off their hearing aids. Rita Dove treats us to lamely jogging doggerel: "One lay slathered in garlands, one left only a

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smear." Tess Gallagher maunders on for three long pages, mostly about attending a parade when she was in pigtails, and offers this trenchant quibble:

> What about a manual exhorting the patriotic
> Duty of pushing doll buggies?

Even worse is Lucille Clifton, who can perpetrate the Technicolor lines:

> Our ears bleed
> Red white and blue

The level of passion in these poems is so low as to be insulting. There is a lot of rant but no real feeling here. Their words betray the poets; even the outrage is recycled,

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drawing on mildewed slogans tucked in some mental attic since Vietnam. If I were an Iraqi, I wouldn't be comforted by the poem by Pamela Hale, "35 years old" from Houston, that begins with less pathos than a Hallmark card:

> I'm sorry that your mom was killed
> When a missile struck your home.

The editor himself chimes in with "Sheepherder's Coffee," though what it has to do with the war eludes me (do we get coffee—or sheep—from Iraq?); one line stands out, because it manages to be both asinine and untrue in equal measure:

> There are fewer names for coffee
> Than for love.

Hamill provides an introduction that is nonpareil for sheer boastfulness. Thus, he writes that "never before in recorded history have so many poets spoken in a single chorus; never before has a single-theme anthology of this proportion been assembled." It is daunting when you think about it: a chorus of 13,000 poets all chanting in unison. Shipped to Baghdad and set asinging, their combined verses would reduce the most hardened Baathist to gibbering capitulation.

Of course, such a book is all too easy to ridicule, but there is a deeper moral that I feel obliged to note, which is the patent dishonesty of the whole endeavor. Not once in this wretched assemblage is there any hint that Iraqi Kurds or Shi'ites or Chaldean Christians ever suffered the least harm under Saddam Hussein, nor is that brute once mentioned. But even Hamill cannot completely hide the truth. In the note to a poem by an Iraqi poet named Salam al-Asadi, who died in 1994, we are told that he was "an eyewitness to the bombing of his hometown in southern Iraq." If Salam died in 1994, it must have been under the savage reprisals set loose by Saddam Hussein against the Shi'ites of the south, and the bombing he witnessed must have been at the hands of the regime. This is left unmentioned. It is misleading, if not downright mendacious, to oppose the war in Iraq without at least hinting that there may have been plausible and defensible reasons for it.

Lovers of verse at its worst, and whose grimed copies of *The Stuffed Owl* are collapsing at the seams, will find much to rejoice in here. If truth, in the old adage, is the first casualty of war, poetry, on the evidence of this farrago, must be the second.

Poets often complain that good critics of poetry are essential to the furtherance of good poetry but that nowadays such critics are dangerously rare, and the names of Randall Jarrell and R. P. Blackmur, among others, are usually invoked in this lament. I doubt the truth both of the proposition and of the supposed scarcity. Most of the out-

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standing critics we still read, from Aristotle and Longinus to Johnson, Hazlitt, Coleridge and the rest, have at best a retrospective value as arbiters; their marvelous prose is of course another matter. Their judgments on their contemporaries were often dead wrong, sometimes spectacularly so. And we do have brilliant critics at work today, such as Christopher Ricks or the indispensable poet and critic William Logan (who, of course, writes regularly for these pages). When poets utter this complaint, what they really mean is that there are no influential critics who support *their* work, and while this may be understandable, it is blinkered.

The problem that does arise, however, is not that we lack good critics but that we have a profusion of gatekeepers. The gatekeeper is not interested in winnowing out what is good from what is bad in contemporary poetry; the gatekeeper is at once a shill and a bouncer, admitting those he or she favors while excluding or ejecting others who can do nothing for the gatekeeper's own interests.

Our two most prominent gatekeepers are Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler, both of whom exercise their self-conferred prerogatives with freewheeling abandon. By dint of vociferous patronage and bullying admonishment, these two professors of literature, pontificating *ex cathedra* from Yale and Harvard, respectively, are reputed to "make or break" the reputations of aspiring poets. The fact that neither professor displays any notable fund of either taste or judgment whenever they stray from their well-demarcated areas of expertise apparently makes no difference to the influence they wield.

Bloom need not detain us unduly. When he is not churning out another fat doorstopper on some well-trodden topic, he is furiously composing blurbs for books by cronies and colleagues; in this compulsive endeavor he is rivaled only by Richard Howard, another blurboholic whose puffery at least has the virtue of being largely unintelligible and, so, harmless. There is also, I must admit, something faintly endearing in Bloom's literary buffoonery; the same cannot be said, alas, of Professor Vendler, who brandishes her laurels, and her secateurs, with appalling earnestness.

No poet I have ever met takes Professor Vendler's judgments seriously, but by the same token, no poet I know will venture to challenge her in print. The usual demurral I hear is that "she's good on Shakespeare."

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And it is true: Point her in the right direction, towards such established poets as Keats or Shakespeare or Wallace Stevens, and she does have, on occasion, interesting and perceptive comments; left to her own devices, however, she goes sadly, and often embarrassingly, astray. Her enthusiastic espousal of such nugatory poets as Rita Dove or Jorie Graham or August Kleinzahler—at best, poets of only passing interest; at worst, boring and unreadable—confounds even her most craven acolytes.

I never considered Professor Vendler's opinions of any great moment, except as flagrant instances of the captious taste that reigns in the academy, until I read an article by Dinitia Smith in *The New York Times* of November 22, 1997, entitled "A Woman of Power in the Ivory Tower." There I learned, for the first time, and to my considerable amazement, that other people heeded her pronouncements and, in fact, that poets in particular cowered before her like eunuchs at the court of some unstable potentate. After reading the article I began to notice

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that whenever Professor Vendler's name came up in conversation with other poets, the chat grew conspicuously guarded; though all agreed, when pressed, that she was fundamentally clueless, not one would deliver an opinion that was not evasive in the end.

The most astonishing comment in the *Times* article came from a poet who wanted to say "something nice" about Professor Vendler but was fearful that she might misconstrue his praise and punish him for it later. A textual authority on Shakespeare's *Sonnets* might misinterpret a word of praise?

> *There is also, I must admit, something faintly endearing in Bloom's literary buffoonery; the same cannot be said, alas, of Professor Vendler, who brandishes her laurels, and her secateurs, with appalling earnestness.*

Extraordinary. Of course, this says more about the cowardice of poets than about Professor Vendler, and yet, how did such a grotesque state of affairs arise in the first place? Have our poets been reduced to the status of curs who flinch in anticipation of a blow? Even allowing for the sort of mischievous exaggeration that *The New York Times*, for all its own overweening earnestness, occasionally indulges in, the situation as described would be comical if it were not so pitiful.

Despite my early reading, I'm no Marmion "whose steady heart and eye/ Ne'er changed in worst extremity," and so I won't risk incurring Professor Vendler's ire by saying "something nice" about her critical endeavors. On matters relating to contemporary poetry, though I agree with some of her opinions and respect her passion in advancing them, I believe that she is more often wrong than not; this wouldn't matter much if she were not a gatekeeper of such influence. Like some self-elected dog-catcher she strews the tainted kibble of her patronage in every direction in the hope of luring new lap-dogs to her gilded kennels; never mind if they later turn out to be sidewalk terriers rather than pedigreed hounds, Professor Vendler will champion them at every show in town. And, to be honest, who wouldn't be tempted? Pulitzer Prizes, MacArthur Awards, tenured jobs at Harvard, fulsome reviews in widely read magazines—all these, if Dinitia Smith is to be believed, flow from her favor.

Of Jorie Graham, her most fervently championed protégé, Vendler can write, with regard to such lank and gelatinous lines as the following,

> the start of a story, the mind trying to fasten
> and fasten, the mind feeling it like a sickness
> this wanting
> to snag, catch hold, begin, the mind crawling
> out to the edge of the cliff
> and feeling the body as if for the first time—
> how it cannot follow, cannot love.

"the dizzying extension of the mind, as it crawls out to the edge of the cliff of the conceptual, presses Graham to her long lines and to their 'outrides'—small piece-lines dropping down at the right margin of their precursor-line." In my view, Graham long since fell over the edge of the cliff, but never mind; does this sentence say anything that can be meaningfully elucidated or even parsed? Again, from the same passage: "Graham redefines the human aim of verse as an earthly, terrain-oriented lateral search (which can reach even the epic dimensions of the Columbian voyage) rather than a vertical Signorelli-like descent into depth." Come again? What is or could be a "terrain-oriented lateral search"? Is there any other kind of descent than "into depth"? Is Vendler writing about a poem or about spelunking? And earlier in the same volume (her 1995 study of Hopkins, Heaney, and

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Graham entitled *The Breaking of Style*), she confides that she found Graham's early poems "so seductive that one's heart, reproducing those poems, almost found a new way to beat," a symptom that would send most of us to the nearest cardiac unit.

Well, leaving aside the pretentious and vapid prose and the misplaced praise, what is really wrong with all this? Though it may seem a *volte-face*, I would say, not much. Though I disagree with Vendler's patronage of Graham and her other sycophants, though I wish she would lend her support to the many worthier poets who might benefit from it, I believe that she is doing exactly what she has been paid to do, that is, pressing her advocacy, with whatever means are at her disposal, to further what she so earnestly believes is good and castigate, with equal earnestness, what she thinks is bad. True, nothing is more galling or more redolent of injustice than to see the dimly gifted or the patently fraudulent hyped out of all proportion to their true merits, but this is how the "world of poetry" functions, after all; you or I, given her opportunities, would be tempted to do the same, though (we like to hope) with happier results.

The problem lies, alas, not with Professor Vendler or Professor Bloom or any other panjandrum of contemporary verse, nor does it lie, I believe, with a dearth of good critics, but rather, with poets themselves. "The fault, dear Brutus . . . " Why do so few poets, and especially those with some reputation, shrink from speaking up? Why does no one (with the admirable exception of William Logan) challenge Professor Vendler and her cronies by rebutting their judgments and questioning their taste? Most urgently, why is there almost no critical discourse worthy of the name in the current "world of poetry?" In my exasperation I am forced back on *Marmion* (indulge me!):

> Thus oft it haps, that when within
> They shrink at sense of secret sin,
> A feather daunts the brave;
> A fool's wild speech confounds the wise,
> And proudest princes veil their eyes
> Before their meanest slave.

There are, of course, poets whose work I admire as much as Professor Vendler does, and particularly, Seamus Heaney, Lucie Brock-Broido, and Charles Wright, to name but these. In fact, the Tennessee-born Charles Wright strikes me as one of the most original and profoundly impressive American poets now active. He is also one of the most ambitious, though his ambition is directed to the growing body of his work rather than to the ephemera drifting from the world of poetry. His *Negative Blue* (Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2000), which gathers up the last of his three sets of trilogies, composed over many years, does not constitute an epic—or if so, only in the sense that Hart Crane's *The Bridge* is one—but is a persuasive sequence of lyrics in which all the finest qualities of a master poet are conspicuous: a gift for metaphor, an intense musicality, a sense of form uniquely his own, and a kind of unmistakable suavity of voice capable of evoking tenderness as well as rage, despair as well as a credible ecstasy.

When I read poems that move me by virtue of their authenticity of word and image and music, I'm not "transported to a better world," but returned to this one with enhanced senses.

Wright would be easy to parody, the sure sign of a strong style; there are far too many poems that bear titles such as "After Reading Chuang Tzu I Step out on the Veranda to Eat a Bowl of Weetabix and Contemplate Orion." But this is a minor fault, if fault it is, as opposed to idiosyncracy. His is also a forcefully spiritual poetry in a very American mode; there is a constant awareness of the holy as manifested in the natural world (an awareness without any of the gush of such worshipful contemporaries of his as,

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say, Mary Oliver). Drawn by this mystical bent he often resorts to abstractions but these are always counterfoiled by the touched, the smelled, the seen, as well as nuanced by his wry sense of himself as an imperfect observer. Notice how in the first section of "Apologia Pro Vita Sua" (from *Black Zodiac* of 1997) Wright begins with a grand abstraction which he then narrows relentlessly down to the tiniest actualities:

> Time is the source of all good,
> time the engenderer
> Of entropy and decay,
> Time the destroyer, our only-begetter and
> advocate.
>
> For instance, my fingernail,
> so pink, so amplified,
> In the half-dark, for instance,
> These force-fed dogwood blossoms,
> green-leafed, defused,
> limp on their long
> branches.
>
> St. Stone, say a little prayer for me,
> grackles and jay in the
> black gum,
> Drowse of the peony head,
> Dandelion globes luminous in the last light,
> more work to be done.

But Wright can be quite directly religious in an uncommon way and some of his poems read like prayers—prayers mediated, it must be said, not only through Dante but through Montale and Paul Celan—as in his variation on the old *Salve Regina* in "Winter-Worship:"

> Mother of Darkness, Our Lady,
> Suffer our supplications,
> our hurts come unto you.
> Hear us from absence your dwelling place,
> Whose ear we plead for.
> End us our outstay.

Wright is also a sensible and edifying commenter on poetry, his own and that of others; from his interviews, moreover, it is clear that he is quite aware of what he himself is trying to accomplish, though, thankfully, not overly so. Hence he can remark, "Mostly, it has to do with the 'music' of poems, whatever that is. Everyone hears it differently, of course. I tend to work in stress groups. I am, like most people who write poems, inordinately fond of my own ear, and trust my ear maybe more than I should. As Woody Allen says, 'It's my second favorite organ." I'm a primitive poet, I think. I trust my ear, I trust my instincts." Every practiced poet will recognize the truth of this; where the critic spots calculation and intentionality, always after the fact, the poet proceeds by instinct and by ear.

It is from life that poetry draws its importance, and not the other way around, that is, from what Henry James once called "felt life."

Though Wright is anything but a "confessional" poet, his poems constitute a kind of diary of his sensibility over a span of decades; the record is rarely self-indulgent, however, because each lyric in the several sequences is guided by a shaping will. All his poems, and not only the threefold trilogy that culminates in *Negative Blue*, possess a densely layered texture woven of the spontaneous and the recollected; if some, or even much, of it appears inconsequential—those small, personal, quotidian details of life as it is lived, day after day—the successive force of the ensemble has an irresistible power. It is the magical, in nature and in history, in words, in the individual consciousness, that Wright incessantly seeks and listens for, and it is astonishing how often he succeeds in summoning intimations of pure magic from the most improbable provocations, not only the "wonderful in the ordinary" (tired trope!), but the odd, unfolding wonder of being here and now, at this time and in this place, wherever it may be, Italy or the Ap-

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palachians or under the night sky of Charlottesville. "What I remember redeems me," he writes, but also:

> My life, like others' lives, has been
> circumscribed by stars.
> *O vaghe stelle dell'orso*,
> Beautiful stars of the Bear,
> I took, one time, from a book.
> Tonight, I take it again, that I, like Leopardi, might
> One day immerse myself in its cold, Lethean shine.

In her earlier, longer version of "Poetry," Marianne Moore wrote, "there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle." By "this fiddle" she meant all the trappings that surround the writing of verse, the hoopla as well as the exaggerated hush. Against this she invoked "the raw material of poetry in/ all its rawness" and "that which is on the other hand/ genuine." Her own fastidious reluctance to publish, her drastic later revisions, her extreme scrupulosity with words, her fidelity to the factual, bear witness to the justice of her "perfect contempt" for poetry, a contempt which was her ultimate integrity. Such a posture with respect to what mattered most to her kept her sense of the genuine intact and alive, but it isn't a posture likely to bring down the usual rewards on its holder's head from the various institutions that take an interest in poetry. I'd argue, however, that it is an essential posture. After all, it is from life that poetry draws its importance, and not the other way around, that is, from what Henry James once called "felt life," and certainly not from workshops or MFA programs or foundations or academies, however useful these may be along the way.

When I read poems that move me by virtue of their authenticity of word and image and music, I'm not "transported to a better world," but returned to this one with enhanced senses, to a world, that is, which is infinitely more particular, more specific, more once-and-for-all-time than my habitual world. I was lucky, I think, to experience it as a kid in however clumsy a form in the stanzas of *Marmion*, a poem I now find pretty much unreadable. What remained wasn't the shape or sound of the lines themselves but a sensation of unlimited and unanticipated possibility confined to a discrete but strangely malleable instant of time. To recover that instant—call it one of enchantment or imaginative liberation or sudden vision, whatever you will—is what counts for both the poet who writes and the lover of poetry who reads. "*Et tout le reste est littérature*," as Verlaine said; or, in other words, the rest is pure gravy.

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Elizabeth Bishop: from coterie to canon

by Dana Gioia

Time to plant tears, *says the almanac.*
—"Sestina"

"Oh, please," Elizabeth Bishop once told me, "Let's not talk about poetry." And that afternoon we didn't. But now, thirty years later, my friend and teacher is no longer here to stop me with one of her firm looks. So, with apologies to Miss Bishop's shade, I shall proceed, though I know she would have been both impatient and embarrassed to read an essay in her honor. And it is my intention to honor her—not with a general panegyric but what I hope is a dispassionate and detailed look at the reasons behind her current popularity.

My subject is how Elizabeth Bishop came—slowly and surprisingly—to be considered the most highly esteemed American poet of the mid-twentieth century. Had I been discussing the leading mid-century poet thirty years ago, my subject would necessarily have been Robert Lowell, who at that moment enjoyed an indisputable preeminence among his contemporaries. I remember James Dickey, no master of understatement, introducing Lowell at a reading in the early 1970s with the closing line, "Here is *our* Milton." Whether or not one agreed with that statement—and I must admit that I did not—one had to accept that it was then, to use a phrase from the reader-response critics, consensually plausible.

If I chose to indulge in Dickeyesque bravado, I might now introduce Bishop by saying, "Here is *our* Dickinson." Today that comparison would also be consensually plausible. No American poet of the mid-century generation, not even Lowell, now stands higher in critical esteem or general popularity. Bishop is currently the most widely taught American woman poet of the twentieth century. Indeed, after Emily Dickinson, she is probably the most widely taught woman poet in the English language.

Is Elizabeth Bishop overrated? Perhaps a bit. I have to confess, however, that for several reasons this question doesn't particularly interest me. First, she is a writer of such excellence and depth that her work not only deserves but also rewards the attention it currently receives. Second, literary preeminence is a precarious state. Thirty years from now another poet will almost certainly have captivated the love of readers and the attention of scholars to be regarded as the generation's leading figure. Who knows who it will be—Theodore Roethke, Gwendolyn Brooks, Weldon Kees, or, once again, Robert Lowell? Indeed, Bishop's reputation is sure to fluctuate over the coming years, but her current vogue does mean that she will remain canonic for the foreseeable future—one of the few poets who is universally anthologized by editors, assigned to students, discussed by critics, and—most important—cherished by readers. For a poet of Bishop's distinction, such a happy afterlife seems quite just. Finally, what does the term "overrated" really mean for most writ-

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ers but a deeply deserved moment of triumph? In Bishop's case, I would invoke the words of the poet Howard Nemerov, who upon receiving—in the span of eight days—both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, exclaimed with satisfaction, "Overrated—at last!"

Instead what interests me is Bishop's steady posthumous rise in fame relative to her contemporaries. She was not an isolated figure of excellence in an unexceptional literary era. She was a member of an immensely talented generation of American writers born in the decade between 1908 and 1918. The first generation of American poets to grow up after the Modernist revolution in the arts, they constitute no merely chronological assembly but a group that displays a strong and cohesive personality shaped—some might even say scarred—by its tumultuous place in American history. Born around the time of the First World War and great influenza pandemic, these poets spent their later childhood during the prosperous Twenties, but then came to maturity during the Great Depression and World War II. Alcoholism, family disruption, mental instability, even madness and suicide were not uncommon among these writers who played a decisive role creating the diverse landscape of contemporary American poetry.

The mid-century generation includes at least a dozen figures besides Bishop for whom one might claim major status—Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, Robert Hayden, Weldon Kees, Randall Jarrell, Gwendolyn Brooks, John Berryman, William Stafford, Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, Kenneth Rexroth, and Thomas McGrath. To this list others might add Karl Shapiro, Delmore Schwartz, Muriel Rukeyser, John Ciardi, Josephine Miles, William Jay Smith, May Swenson, and William Everson. Among such worthy company, how did Bishop come to her current preeminence?

If Bishop's present apotheosis was preordained by Fate, no one told us thirty years ago. At Harvard in 1975 when I studied with Bishop and often spent afternoons chatting with her in a Cambridge teashop, she was a respected elder poet but no literary celebrity. Her seminar on modern American poetry, which I took, had only four other students—a reliable sign of her literary market value in fashion-conscious Cambridge. If John Ashbery exaggerated a few years later when he called Bishop a "writer's writer's writer," it wasn't much of an exaggeration.

Bishop, of course, had never been a neglected figure. By 1975 she had already won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, but so had Alan Dugan whom few people read. Bishop was not yet a poet of either wide academic acclaim or broad popularity. In anthologies her work was generally represented by one or two poems, almost inevitably "The Fish" and perhaps "The Man-Moth" or "The Armadillo," and she usually received significantly less space than writers like Lowell, Jarrell, Duncan, Roethke, or Berryman. Many anthologies, especially college textbooks, omitted her altogether. Confessional and political poetry were then the rage, and Bishop seemed a tame and traditional figure compared to currently celebrated women poets like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath.

In 1975 Bishop's reputation rested on the support of a small, loyal, and influential coterie—a "fit audience though few"—composed not of academic critics or literary journalists but of poets, including some who had admired her work from the beginning. If Bishop was then indeed a poet's poet, she did have the satisfaction of having assembled a notably prestigious circle of admiring fellow artists, which included Robert Lowell, Howard Moss, Robert Fitzgerald, James Merrill, John Malcolm Brinnin, Anne Stevenson, Richard Wilbur, and John Ashbery, as well as several recently departed admirers—most conspicuously Marianne Moore, Louise Bogan, and Randall Jarrell. Many of these poets had expressed their high opinion of her work in print, but their support was also—perhaps primarily—private and in-

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stitutional. They helped her win prizes and fellowships, and they secured her the Poetry Consultancy at the Library of Congress and eventually a teaching job at Harvard.

Meanwhile in academic criticism Bishop hardly existed. If one goes back to read the major critical surveys of contemporary American poetry published between 1960 and 1975, one is struck by how infrequently Bishop's name appears. Indeed, some books never mention her at all. Others discuss her briefly—sometimes only in a sentence or two—usually in conjunction with Lowell. A few books group her with the decade-younger Richard Wilbur (another early winner of both the Pulitzer and National Book Award) but inevitably for double dismissal as too traditional, genteel, and unadventurous in a brave new world of open form, deep image, and leaping poetry. In her lifetime only one book was published on Bishop's work—Anne Stevenson's 1966 study in the all-inclusive and unprestigious Twayne series—a pioneering but (as even its own author now admits) inadequate volume hampered by the lack of biographical and critical material then available.

To gain a specific sense of Bishop's academic reputation at that time, one need only consult the standard bibliography. By her sixty-sixth birthday on February 8, 1977, there had only been twenty articles, most very short—not counting reviews or interviews—published in English about her work. Only in the last two years of her life was there a decisive and sudden change in her literary reputation. As winner of the Neustadt Award, Bishop became the subject late in 1977 of a special issue of *World Literature Today* featuring seventeen articles on her work—effectively doubling in one stroke the criticism available on her writing. Meanwhile other articles and interviews appeared in a special feature in *Ploughshares*. That December also saw the first MLA Panel devoted to her work. By the end of 1977 twenty-six new articles, four interviews, as well as thirty reviews of *Geography III* had appeared. For the first time a substantial number of the articles were written by critics rather than poets. By the time Bishop died in October 1979, there had been both a significant change and great expansion in her constituency. No one quite realized it yet, but she had been transformed—to use the proper clichés—from a "poet's poet" into an "academic field."

Over the next two decades one witnessed what Thomas Travisano has dubbed "the Elizabeth Bishop phenomenon"—a decisive revision of the canon of mid-twentieth-century American poetry. In anthologies and literary histories, on reading lists and conference panels, in scholarly journals and critical reviews, in dorm rooms and cafés, Bishop's position steadily grew while other writers, especially Roethke and Berryman, lost ground, and still others like Schwartz, Shapiro, Ciardi, Rexroth, McGrath, and Everson virtually disappeared, despite the considerable efforts of their assorted advocates. Soon even Lowell's seemingly impregnable reputation suffered in comparison.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I must confide that I played a small part in this transformation—having published both a memoir and an essay on Bishop during the period in question. I mention this fact, however, not to brag but to make a small historical observation. I began writing my memoir, "Studying with Miss Bishop," in 1980, a few months after the poet's death because—and no one today will believe me—I was worried that she would be forgotten. By the time I published the piece in *The New Yorker* several years later, I realized my fears had been in vain. We had already begun to witness the canonization of a literary saint.

Always offer everyone a ride.
—"Manners"

What forces moved Bishop's position from coterie to canon? What accounts for her current preeminence among other leading poets of her generation? Why has she become so popular among readers and irresis-

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tible to critics of so many differing persuasions? These questions matter not only because they serve to illuminate certain qualities of Bishop's work but also because they reveal important but elusive aspects of contemporary literary culture—most notably the complex but essential process of developing cultural consensus.

There will be some people for whom the term *consensus* has negative connotations, suggesting fatal compromise, lowered standards, or lost ideological purity. One might, however, take a different perspective. In Latin *consensus* means "common feeling," which is to say, a shared sympathy or mutual sense that unites different people. The root meaning of *consensus* is exactly what we see in "the Elizabeth Bishop phenomenon." Her literary canonization reflected a shared recognition of the uncommon value of her work by different people who used it for quite different purposes. That such a consensus was not only possible but necessary during the past twenty years reveals something essential about the changes in recent American literary life. That such a consensus occurred around a writer whose work had previously been neglected by academic critics likewise reveals something essential about Bishop's poetry.

Literary culture is a conversation, a vast and endless dialogue between writers and readers, teachers and students, critics and artists. It is a constantly changing dialectic, not a static state of affairs. In studying the rise of Bishop's reputation, therefore, it is essential to recognize the complex and dynamic nature of the process. There is no single reason for the phenomenon but rather a confluence of forces and circumstances that combined to foster the ongoing conversation around her work.

The first of these forces is the intrinsic quality of her work. Some poems, no matter what certain theorists claim, are better than others—richer in meaning, deeper in effect, more memorable in expression. Posterity is an unforgiving judge. There are some writers in Bishop's generation—Delmore Schwartz is perhaps the most interesting example—who had brilliant minds and boundless invention but whose poetry, however impressive in scope and serious in ambition, is simply not good enough to sustain a major reputation.

Bishop's poetry, however, is powerful in conception and richly realized in execution. Her language is intricately layered and glistens with provocative ambiguity and subtle interplay between text and subtext. She also displays the poet's necessary genius for the memorable expression of compelling ideas and observations. A traditional test of poetic quality is quotation. How effectively does a poet embody the imaginative energy of a work in its component parts? Just consider in isolation a few single lines from Bishop to see how evocative her seemingly quiet and conversational language can be:

> More delicate than the historians' are the
> map-makers' colors.
>
> The art of losing isn't hard to master.
>
> Cold dark deep and absolutely clear.
>
> Waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb.
>
> Should we have stayed at home and thought
> of here?

"Somebody loves us all," is the famous concluding line of "Filling Station," and most poetry readers now profess to love Elizabeth. But to claim excellence for her work in no way adequately explains her eminent popularity. Theodore Roethke's poetry is no less excellent today than it was in 1975, and yet his reputation has fallen, at least in relative terms. Weldon Kees's poetry is also superb and has proved deeply influential on younger writers, yet his reputation remains confined to a coterie of poets and artists. Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry is immensely popular among both teachers and students, yet it has failed to attract substantial critical attention outside of African-American literary specialists. Many distinguished poets are neglected or forgotten. Who today, for example, remembers the estimable Winnfield

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Townley Scott? Artistic excellence may be indispensable in creating a major reputation, but it alone does not suffice. What other factors can we discern?

There were at least two sociological reasons for Bishop's rise. The first and most obvious was that she was a woman—a biological fact that she shared not only with a slight majority of the human race but also with a growing majority of English professors, graduate students, and undergraduate majors. During the radical revision of the literary canon initiated in the 1980s, perhaps the most significant trend was the inclusion of women in a new narrative of literary history, which tried to give voice to a broader cross-section of humanity.

Enduring literary revolutions usually begin not by making subtle theoretical observations but by asking embarrassingly big and obvious questions. In this case a new generation of scholars, informed by feminism and bolstered by common sense, asked if important works by women had not been misread or marginalized by critical assumptions that ignored their stated goals, distinct traditions, and social contexts. As recent history demonstrates, the feminist charge was irrefutable, even if the recommended literary remedies were sometimes debatable. In the two decades following Bishop's death, the typical survey class in American poetry that previously went from Edward Taylor to Robert Lowell now began with Anne Bradstreet and ended with Elizabeth Bishop.

A second related sociological reason for Bishop's rise among academic critics was her identity as a lesbian, which had not been widely known during her lifetime. As gender criticism explored how an author's sexuality influenced his or her work, it was inevitable that Bishop's poetry would attract lesbian scholars, and as she rose in prominence, she became the first incontestably lesbian poet to enter the American canon. This distinction would have horrified the very proper and obsessively discreet author, who would not even allow her poems to appear in an *all*-woman anthology, not to mention a lesbian one, but it seems clear that both her sex and sexuality significantly worked in her favor—albeit posthumously.

Yet the argument that Bishop's current prominence is mostly the result of political correctness and gender balancing is both incomplete and unconvincing. There were other strong women poets in her generation—Josephine Miles, May Swenson, Barbara Howes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Muriel Rukeyser, and Jean Garrigue. Yet none of them has experienced the same level of canonization. If political correctness is as powerful and indiscriminate as certain critics claim, why hasn't Miles, who wrote magnificently despite her excruciating and crippling disabilities, experienced a similar boom? Or if lesbianism in itself were enough, why has Swenson's reputation been so slow in developing? Rukeyser's once faltering reputation may have been salvaged by her fastidious political correctness in every category, but ideology alone was not enough to make her mandatory for reading lists or build a broad new audience of admirers. Sociological factors have surely helped Bishop's reputation, but they are not primarily responsible for her singular eminence.

Looking at these same sociological factors from a different perspective, however—one that is neither feminist nor neoconservative—we begin to notice something that brings us closer to the driving force behind Bishop's rise in reputation. Although Bishop herself insisted that "Art is art and should have nothing to do with gender," we must nonetheless admit that her work responds to feminist readings. That approach reveals and elucidates important aspects of the poems. Likewise some of her poems respond to lesbian readings. At the same time, however, we must also note that a critic or teacher who has no particular interest in feminist criticism or gender theory can entirely ignore those approaches and still satisfactorily teach or discuss Bishop's work. By contrast, it would be difficult to claim the same pedagogic flexibility for Rukeyser's work, which does not always afford interpretations independent of its own ideological premises.

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There is something essentially disinterested and noncommittal about Bishop's sensibility that is central to her broad appeal. More than any major American poet of her generation she possessed what John Keats celebrated as "negative capability," the imaginative power "of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." She had a native genius for reflecting the rich complexity of experience without reducing it into abstraction or predetermined moral judgment. She is inclusive by being artfully inconclusive. This quality of her work is not always evident when we read it casually, but once we teach her poems or analyze them seriously, this aspect is hard to ignore. There was once a term commonly used to describe this sort of meaningful ambiguity and openness to diverse kinds of interpretation: universality. Much derided and oddly misconstrued by critical theorists in recent decades, universality remains an inescapable literary notion. The term does not describe literary works that have fixed and identical appeal to all audiences everywhere; rather, universality refers to works that have a remarkable ability to engage very different audiences often in notably different ways.

Bishop's universality is evident in the great variety of critical approaches that have been successfully used in interpreting her work, including some approaches she might have disliked. Bishop, for example, detested confessional poetry. "You'd just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves," she told *Time* in 1967 for their cover story on Robert Lowell. Yet as Brett Millier, Anne Stevenson, David Kalstone, Lorrie Goldensohn, Victoria Harrison, Thomas Travisano, Gary Fountain, and others have repeatedly demonstrated, her work responds to, indeed often seems to demand, autobiographical readings. "I always tell the truth in my poems," she once remarked to a student, and a great many of her poems—in some crucial sense—really happened. Yet her sensibility so imbues those same poems with objectified and indeterminate detail that her work also responds to—and indeed often seems to demand—a detached formalist reading of the New Critical variety to avoid limiting the text's meaning to the merely autobiographical.

. . . rising toward a saint
still honored in these parts
—"The Armadillo"

To understand the canonization of Elizabeth Bishop one must, therefore, survey the current literary situation with an appreciation of paradox and irony. Paradoxically, she is praised and appreciated by different people for reasons that seem—at least on the surface—contradictory. If poetic irony is generally defined as language that says one thing while meaning something else, then St. Elizabeth of Worcester possessed the miraculous, indeed Pentecostal power of saying one thing that meant virtually as many different things as her readers wanted to hear. She also displayed the legendary saintly gift of bilocation, the supernatural ability to be in two places at once. During the bitterly divisive culture wars of the past quarter century, Bishop could simultaneously appear on both sides of nearly every issue—the ally of both reformer and traditionalist, patron saint to both radical and reactionary—not to mention those beleaguered pilgrims traveling steadfastly in the middle of the road.

To appreciate the exquisitely paradoxical quality of her position, observe two other ironic aspects of her canonization—her formalism and her literalism. Master of the ballad, sestina, sonnet, and villanelle, Bishop was a scrupulous formalist who even insisted on scanning free verse. How paradoxical then that she entered the canon in the early 1980s when "open form" was the dominant compositional principle, and meter and rhyme were considered—choose your own adjective since they were all used by academic critics of the period—reactionary, restrictive, moribund, masculine, Eurocentric, phallocentric, and un-American. For many formal poets, Bishop became a

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model of quiet virtuosity, imaginative integrity, and technical dexterity, which ranged from traditional meters to prose poems and syllabics. Many younger poets, like myself, also admired the way she refused to see free and formal verse as mutually exclusive techniques, but allowed the poem to take whatever shape its inspiration or, in many cases, the process of revision suggested.

Bishop became the first contemporary formalist to enter the academic canon since the resurgence of free verse in the early sixties when the Beats, Black Arts, Black Mountain, and Deep Image groups came into prominence. Bishop's identity as a woman and lesbian effectively neutralized the largely ideological anti-formalist arguments that were simultaneously being leveled against very similar poets such as Richard Wilbur. At the same time the presence of both free and formal verse in her oeuvre allowed readers of different camps to choose the work they preferred and even—another testimony of her saintly power—to discover that there was something to be said for the pleasures of both approaches.

Even more deliciously paradoxical was Bishop's entry into the canon at the height of deconstructionism, an ideology that not only denied the ability of words to reflect reality but ultimately even questioned the existence of any knowable objective reality. To quote its now fallen evangelist, Paul de Man, deconstructionism insisted on "the impossibility of making the actual expression coincide with what has to be expressed, of making the actual signs coincide with what is signified." While this new gospel was being preached from the pulpit, it is instructive to remember that a shrine to Saint Elizabeth, the most literal of poets, was being erected in the side chapel.

For Bishop, the physical world was real, and language, if used carefully, could describe it well enough to communicate something essential. In classes, she insisted that the literal meaning of a poem was the poem. She made students look up definitions of words, especially unusual nouns, and then provide their classmates with physical descriptions of the objects. The key to understanding William Carlos Williams's "Queen Anne's Lace," she asserted, was not simply in the text but also in the actual flower it described. The poem and the world did not exist in parallel universes but collaborated in a complex but comprehensible conversation. At Harvard, for example, she once insisted that if I wanted to understand Lowell's poetry I had to visit the monuments and buildings mentioned in it. A clever young graduate student, who had read Foucault and Lukacs in the original, I thought her attitude quaint—until I followed her advice and discovered she was quite right. The world has much to teach us about poetry just as poetry can tell us much about the world.

During the 1980s, English departments experienced an ideological rift, which persists today, between theorists and humanists. In Bishop's case, however, it didn't matter what side you were on because every party found some use for her person or poetry. The postmodernists celebrated her subversive subtexts and outsider status while the traditionalists felt satisfied that here at last was a contemporary poet of technical skill, narrative complexity, and expressive power who, to adapt the words of W. H. Auden, could be "Admired for her earnest habit of calling the sun the sun, her mind Puzzle."

Although both sides on various issues could invoke Bishop, it does seem, in retrospect, that her canonization revealed a significant shift in literary sensibility that began in the early 1980s. Travisano has characterized this shift in "Critical Paradigm" as a move away from the model of confessional poetry, but the changes in critical sensibility went much deeper. The appearances on academic reading lists of Bishop's "The Moose," a straightforward rhymed narrative of 168 lines, "One Art," a villanelle, or "Sestina," suggest a broader revolution away from experimental Moder-

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nist poetics toward the rehabilitation of form, narrative, and linear expository structure as contemporary verse modes. Literary history is not linear but dialectic. As each new movement or sensibility emerges, its triumph creates not only the monuments of its perpetuity but also the excesses that precipitate its own demise. Each period of experimentation is followed by one of assimilation. Bishop's rise marked the beginning of a period of assimilation—a reconciliation of traditional and Modernist literary principles. The same qualities that had made Bishop seem slightly old-fashioned in 1970 made her seem more contemporary in the 1990s.

Bishop's entry into the canon also paralleled a shift that one also saw in fiction with the rising reputations of naturalist writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Raymond Carver—writers who would have been considered too morally earnest and formally conservative twenty years earlier when an aesthetic of late Modernist experimentalism was still dominant. The ascendancy of Bishop, Hurston, Carver, and Walker reveals an increased interest in content—psychological, social, cultural, and political—as well as growing realization that the Modernist era was over.

as our good manners required
—"Manners"

There are two contrasting traditional metaphors for poetry—the mirror and the lamp. The classical conception of the mirror sees art as a mimetic representation of an objective and pre-existing reality. This is the approach that Hamlet praises to the traveling players when he says that the purpose of theater is "To hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." The contrasting metaphor of the lamp, as M. H. Abrams has documented, is romantic, self-expressive, and prophetic. The poem is the lamp, which not only illuminates but also colors whatever it reveals with its own essence. These two metaphors are in some sense contradictory, but neither vision invalidates the other. They represent two temperamental poles of human nature—two sides of an enduring dialectic between objective and subjective theories of knowledge.

Between these competing visions, there is no question that for Bishop poetry was a mirror—a framed reflection of a shared reality. The mirror is no idle metaphor for Bishop's work. She carefully polished the surfaces of her poems to remove the merely personal, the accidents of autobiography. (And her mirrors are so constructed that they even allow the determined postmodernist to step through the glass into a world where everything is backward.) She had the gift of objectification—of presenting the personal in universalized terms without losing its specificity. Her poems invite and reward our attention, but they ask us to collaborate with the author, so that what we see in them almost inevitably includes some part of ourselves.

In a confessional and narcissistic age, Bishop was communal and inclusive. Her poems are more personal than autobiographical. Their traditional protocols of form and genre exist to provide a common etiquette to put us all on a polite and equal footing. Unlike many contemporary poems, hers are not eager to please but they are "determined to have good manners." They never condescend to the reader, but treat him or her as equals. They leave enough space for each reader to bring his or her life experience into the text. Her poems are a mirror in which we discover both Bishop and ourselves, whoever that may be.

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The morality of Anthony Hecht

by David Yezzi

Few men speak humbly of humility, chastely of chastity, skeptically of skepticism.
—Pascal, quoted by Anthony Hecht

Some poets cavil at the notion of a "collected poems" in their lifetime. While I can't quite imagine it, I think I see their point. There's something peremptory about a collected, like cashing in one's chips and leaving the game. And who would feel that he had written enough? Edgar Bowers, pleased by the handsome edition of his poems in one volume, said he only wished that it were longer—not unlike life itself, I want to add. A collected poems lays bare an entire career. And was it worth it, the many years spent jotting? A collected contains all that's needed for readers—and even for the poet himself—to answer yes or no.

Anthony Hecht's recent *Collected Later Poems*[1] takes up where his magnificent *Collected Earlier Poems* leaves off. The two books span some fifty years of writing, from *A Summoning of Stones* in 1954 to roughly the present. Hecht, of course, is still very much with us and adding to his complete works, but, regardless of any poems that follow, these two volumes constitute one of the great achievements in poetry of the last hundred years.

This will be even clearer, I suspect, in decades to follow, which is not to say that Hecht has suffered neglect. He is one of our most laureled poets. But the *way* that critics celebrate Hecht often strikes me as both backhanded and wholly typical of the current climate in American poetry. "An accomplished formalist" recurs as the standard tag, the phrase meant as qualified praise, like complimenting someone's calligraphy—very pretty, no doubt, and once valued, perhaps, but rather too precious for anything today beyond addressing wedding invitations. Elegant but irrelevant.

The ineptitude of this kind of grudging appreciation is not the worst of it. One pities those who feel that a given age can accommodate only one kind of poetry (free verse these days, presumably), as if important work by both Eliot and Hardy, for example, did not issue from the 1920s, or from Larkin and Bunting in the 1960s, or from Geoffrey Hill in both free and metered verse throughout his career. No, the real downside to the appellation "formalist," more damning than the taint of fustiness, is the way it precludes poems from being anything other than formal. A good formalist, the epithet suggests, is one who produces exquisite verse, period.

No one, I think, disputes Hecht's command of English verse, but, because prosodic skill is a rare and useless talent in this free-verse age, his work sometimes arouses the same admiration lavished on a bipedal poodle. Labeling Hecht a formalist, while undeniable in the most obvious sense,

1 *Collected Later Poems*, by Anthony Hecht; Alfred A. Knopf, 231 pages, $25.

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misses the point. If anyone puts paid to the notion that metrical skill cancels passion, it's Hecht. What's more, if form and subject matter may be seen as complementary and interdependent, the opposite point better characterizes his work: Hecht may be the foremost "matterist" of his age, a feat more brilliant and difficult, in the end, than the mastery of traditional forms that he so abundantly displays.

The *Later Poems* provides an occasion to survey Hecht's matter in toto, by which I mean something more than the sum of his lucidly limned subjects: a marriage dissolving, a painter *en plein air*, an orchestra tuning, sounds echoing in a cathedral. Nor do I mean those Hechtian signatures that crop up in poem after poem, such as the meliorating power (woefully limited) of art, music, and culture; Talmudic confrontations with biblical writing; Jamesian dramas of dissolution and death; savage satires. If there exists one overarching concern, one touchstone for testing all of Hecht's poems, it is his abiding moral sense.

The poems seethe with Hecht's grim appraisals of human failure, and no institution or endeavor—not art, religion, culture, politics—escapes indictment, whether satiric, bitter, or melancholy. Much has been made of Hecht's pervasive melancholy, but it is not his worldly melancholy, his world-weariness, that I want to consider, but, rather, his spiritual melancholy—his striving for (and dejection at the loss of) if not God then redemption, justice, righteousness.

Despite Hecht's dream of the upright life, his poems firmly inhabit the fallen world. He remains dubious, to say the least, about the possibility of man's adhering to the cardinal virtues, yet he returns to them, and to their ever-present opposites, as to a wound that will not heal:

> What do those distant thunderheads betide?
> Nothing to do with us. Not our disgrace
> That the raped corpse of a fourteen-year-old,
> tied
> With friction tape, is found in a ditch, and
> a tide
> Of violent crime breaks out. Yet the world
> grown
> Wrathful, corrupt, once loosed a true floodtide
> That inched inside the wards where the frail are
> tied
> To their beds, invaded attics, climbed to
> disclose
> Sharks in the nurseries, eels on the floors, to
> close
> Over lives and cries and herds, and on that tide,
> Which splintered barn, cottage and city piece-
> Meal, one sole family rode the world to peace.
>
> Think of the glittering morning when God's
> peace
> Flooded the heavens as it withdrew the tide:
> Sweet grasses, endless fields of such rich peace
> That for long after, when men dreamed of
> peace
> It seemed a place where beast and human grace
> A pastoral landscape, a Virgilian peace,
> Or scene such as Mantegna's masterpiece
> Of kneeling shepherds. But that dream has
> grown
> Threadbare, improbable, and our paupers
> groan
> While "stockpiled warheads guarantee our
> peace,"
> And troops, red-handed, muscle in for the
> close.
> Ours is a wound that bleeds and will not close.

(Note Hecht's masterly handling of the long periods here.) The voice in this canzone, entitled "Terms," proceeds in the vein of Horace through Auden. Few poets today even attempt this kind of public rhetoric, which, in its search for universal values, leaves a sour taste in the mouths of the subjective, interior lyricists currently in fashion.

It was not always so. While public poetry has lately devolved into issue-specific tirades served up with a generous scoop of self-righteousness, masters of the public voice have made a decisive mark on modern and contemporary poetry, from Hardy and Yeats to Auden and Hecht. One hears overtones of Auden's "Shield of Achilles" as a descant hovering above Hecht's lines:

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A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,
Loitered about that vacancy, a bird
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:
That girls were raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
Of any world where promises were kept,
Or one could weep because another wept.

Rape and murder are axioms for which the characters in both poems (who are there to represent us) quickly relieve themselves of any responsibility.

Like Auden's, Hecht's vision of the world as a place devoid of peace (save for the "peace" that stockpiled warheads guarantee) could not be bleaker. The true power of both "Terms" and "The Shield of Achilles," however, lies in their moral indictment of the participants in such violence—whether active or passive—and, by extension, of the reader and even of the poet himself. Auden gets at it thus:

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot
Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)
And sentries sweated for the day was hot:
A crowd of ordinary decent folk
Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
As three pale figures were led forth and bound
To three posts driven upright in the ground.

Auden's modern Golgotha features no redeemer, merely three prisoners similarly fated. The scene grows starkest not in its description of the imprisoned victims or even in the banality of the lounging officials but in the implication of the reader, who locates himself among the helpless "crowd of ordinary decent folk." The line introducing the throng of spectators depicts them as blameless, while the second reveals them as quite the opposite. They neither move (either to flee or intervene) nor speak up (in protest or in witness). Life's like that, we shrug along with them, as Auden reveals our complicity in the fallen state of things by turning a mirror on our resignation and acceptance. The reader may even feel pride at having sensitively apprehended Auden's moral critique of the crowd, oblivious that Auden has included him in their number. Hecht works the same sly reversal in "Terms," in which the litany of atrocities—rape and murder—are "Nothing to us. Not our disgrace." Yet it is everything to us in a world where the dream of peace "has grown/ Threadbare, improbable." Again, we are implicated: "Ours is a wound that bleeds and will not close."

Hecht marshals his moral critique—in which, it should be said, he includes himself—not only in the public Horatian voice of "Terms" but also in more intimate lyric, narrative, and dramatic voices. "The Feast of Stephen," from Hecht's *Collected Earlier Poems*, contains a section in his narrative voice that also recalls the indictment of the bystanders in Auden's "Shield of Achilles." Here one man, Saul, stands in as the "audience character":

Out in the rippled heat of a neighbor's field,
In the kilowatts of noon, they've got one cornered.
The bugs are jumping, and the burly youths
Strip to the waist for the hot work ahead.
They go to arm themselves at the dry-stone wall,
Having flung down their wet and salty garments
At the feet of a young man whose name is Saul.
He watches sharply these superbly tanned
Figures with a swimmer's chest and shoulders,
A miller's thighs, with their self-conscious grace,
And in between their sleek, converging bodies,
Brilliantly oiled and burnished in the sun,
He catches a brief glimpse of blooded hair
And hears an unintelligible prayer.

The description recalls the martyrdom of St. Stephen, described by Luke in Acts 6–8. The presence of "kilowatts," however, unmoors the scene from a strict imagining of the biblical account. (Auden's barbed wire serves a similar function in the classical context of "Shield.") Similarly, "They've got one

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cornered" suggests more the anonymity of a crime of racial persecution than the slaying of a specific saint.

The character of Saul, lifted straight from Acts, functions on two levels. In the context of the poem, he is the witness who observes and does nothing to stop the violence. He "watches sharply": keenly or with shock and horror? The presence of Saul makes space for the reader within the moral framework of the scene. Without Saul, the stoning would unfold at a distance, with no possibility of outside intervention. To have him there but doing nothing places the reader there as well, asking us to consider occasions when we have stood by in the face of injustice.

Saul takes on further resonance through allusion to the biblical story, in which Saul (later the apostle Paul) looks on not helplessly but approvingly. The first line of Acts 8 baldly states Saul's complicity. A further meaning that Hecht understands but does not need to state explicitly is the historical resonance of Saul's presence in the narrative. By becoming, with his conversion, an apostle of Christ, Saul rises to the status of a Christian saint. Saul's ultimate salvation, however, is not Hecht's point, I think. As Hecht suggests elsewhere in his poems, the legacy of Christianity (which Saul becomes instrumental in propagating) and of all dogmatic religions for that matter, is not the story of God revealed to man so much as a chain of human atrocity and persecution in God's name.

The poem closes with an "unintelligible prayer." The account in Acts ends: "'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he fell on his knees and cried aloud, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them,' and then he died." The fact that Hecht makes his prayer unintelligible suggests a number of melancholy possibilities for the poem: it is unintelligible because no God hears or understands it, or because the victim is too near death to be articulate, or because Saul stands (as we stand) too far outside of the circle, too detached, to make it out. Any way you look at it, Hecht's version has no upside, no redemption, no forgiveness, only death.

Hecht has explained that he does not hold any dogmatic religion. Born to a Jewish family in the Bronx, he was educated largely in sectarian Christian schools. He has gained an understanding of both religions not as a practitioner but as an artist and a thinker. His complex and sustained engagement with religion and the Bible has grown up outside of traditional faith, I suspect, with the result that, in his poems, he has become that rather improbable phenomenon, a secular moralist. I say improbable because, if his moral sense is not based on the dogmatic teachings of a given religion, then what is it based on? It seems to derive from a kind of skeptical humanism that continually weighs biblical teaching with the lessons of art and culture both ancient and modern. Hecht knows his Greeks as fully as he knows his Torah, and his moral bearings are taken from the intersecting lines of Western thought throughout the ages.

Hecht's moral orientation must also stem to some degree from his own life experience, and he has been unfortunate enough to witness evil at first hand. Evil, by sheer contrast, can be one of the clearest signposts to good. In Deuteronomy, for example, Moses says to the Israelites: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, and for that reason the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day." Later, Moses warns the Israelites that, if they fail to live justly, "The Lord will bring you sorrowing back to Egypt by that very road of which I said to you, 'You shall not see that road again . . .'" "May the Lord strike you with Egyptian boils and with tumors, scabs, and itches, for which you will find no cure," Moses adds at one point. Egypt, then, becomes for the Israelites the place of evil and enslavement to which they must never return. What keeps them from backsliding to Egypt is moral law. For Hecht, the evil to which we must never return, and which he himself has seen, is the Nazi death camps.

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As a soldier in the Second World War, Hecht was present at the liberation of Flossenberg, an annex of Buchenwald, which, as he tells Philip Hoy in an invaluable book-length interview,[2] "was both an extermination camp and a slave-labor camp." "When we arrived," Hecht continues,

> the SS personnel had, of course, fled. Prisoners were dying at the rate of 500 a day from typhus. Since I had the rudiments of French and German, I was appointed to interview such French prisoners as were well enough to speak, in the hope of securing evidence against those who ran the camp. Later, when some of these were captured, I presented them with the charges leveled against them, translating their denials or defenses back into French for the sake of their accusers, in an attempt to get to the bottom of what was done and who was responsible.

There is a sense in which this concern with responsibility has been Hecht's project ever since. As he writes in the fourth section of "Rites and Ceremonies":

> And to what purpose, as the darkness closes about
> And the child screams in the jellied fire,
> Had best be our present concern,
> Here in the wilderness of comfort
> In which we dwell.
> Shall we now consider
> The suspicious postures of our virtue,
> The deformed consequences of our love,
> The painful issues of our mildest acts?
> Where is there one
> Mad, poor and betrayed enough to find
> Forgiveness for us, saying,
> "None does offend,
> None, I say,
> None"?

Hecht explains to Philip Hoy, "It is pain that might be redemptive, but just possibly might not. This was a quandary, and a torment in which, for a long time, I dwelt."

Hecht's poems are clearly haunted by biography, and perhaps most markedly by the horrors that he encountered in that camp in the Bavarian forest. "The Book of Yolek," a sestina about a young victim of just such a camp, contains these lines:

> Whether on a silent, solitary walk
> Or among crowds, far off or safe at home,
> You will remember, helplessly, that day,
> And the smell of the smoke, and the loudspeakers of the camp.
> Wherever you are, Yolek will be there, too.
> His unuttered name will interrupt your meal.
>
> Prepare to receive him in your home some day.
> Though they killed him in the camp they sent him to,
> He will walk in as you're sitting down to a meal.

Yolek as Elijah (the title of the poem itself has a biblical ring): Hecht suggests that all of us, including Hecht himself, must set a place at our tables for this murdered boy.

If proof is needed that Hecht's technical mastery directly serves the semantic and emotional force of his poems, one need look no further than this poem. The recurrence of the word *camp* as a teleuton quietly maps the poet's disillusionment, as his pleasant postprandial walk gives way to memories of the Holocaust. Hecht has positioned the word, which follows the pattern of repetition prescribed by the form, such that it occurs in consecutive lines directly in the center of the poem: "In close formation off to a special camp. // How often you have thought about that camp." It is the first time in the poem that *camp* comes to mean *death camp*. In the previous two instances *camp* appears in the figure of speech "set up camp" and in the innocent phrase "summer camp." Hecht deftly accentuates the horror in the poem by transforming the word before our eyes.

Any number of poems from the earlier and later collected poems explore the ramifica-

2 *Anthony Hecht in Conversation with Philip Hoy*, by Philip Hoy; Between the Lines, 144 pages, $22 (paper).

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tions of guilt and denial, sin and redemption. There are "The Seven Deadly Sins," from *The Hard Hours*, accompanied by woodcuts by the artist Leonard Baskin. Baskin's woodcuts also figure in Hecht's later sequence "The Presumptions of Death," from *Flight Among the Tombs*. "Death the Whore," from this sequence, suggests the ways in which we are haunted by conscience and memory. "Pig," "Rites and Ceremonies," "A Letter," "Adam," "Goliardic Song," "'Gladness of the Best,'" "Poem Upon the Lisbon Disaster," and numerous other poems touching on morality, religion, and the Bible appear throughout *The Collected Earlier Poems*.

In *The Collected Later Poems*, "'The Darkness and the Light Are Both Alike to Thee'" (which lends a part of its title to an entire collection), takes off from Psalms 139:12. Other poems from the volume *The Darkness and the Light* that touch on the Bible, morality, and sin include "Circles," "Memory," "Samson," "Haman," "Saul and David," "Judith," "Illumination," "Look Deep," "Lot's Wife," "The Witch of Endor," "The Road to Damascus," and "Elders." "Indolence" takes a wry whack at the question of right and wrong, giving the lie again to the reader's complacency. While poems similarly concerned may be found throughout the later poems, *The Darkness and the Light* is clearly Hecht's book on the Bible.

Few poets have mined biblical stories as fruitfully as Hecht. As in "The Feast of Stephen," "Sacrifice," from *The Darkness and the Light*, maintains fidelity to the ancient narratives, while updating them with modern settings. Hecht's take in the poem on the sacrifice of Isaac begins with sections in the voices, first, of Abraham ("He led me, knowing where my heart would break,/ Into temptation") and, then, of Isaac himself ("We were sentenced and reprieved by the same Voice"). The third section tells the story of a German soldier's encounter with a rural family in France in 1945. The German army is in full retreat, the straggling infantry left to fend for themselves in the French countryside. As a precaution, the family disassembles their bicycle and conceals the parts in the upper boughs of their orchard. At dawn one morning, while the family is at breakfast (another meal disturbed, as in "The Book of Yolek"), the soldier comes demanding a bicycle. The father explains that they have none. The soldier lacks the time to search the property, so he:

> Judiciously singled out the eldest son,
> A boy perhaps fourteen, but big for his years,
> Obliging him to place himself alone
> Against the whitewashed front wall of the house.
> Then, at the infallible distance of ten feet,
> With rifle pointed right at the boy's chest,
> The soldier shouted what was certainly meant
> To be his terminal order: *BICYCLETTE!*
>
> It was still early on a chilly morning.
> The water in the tire-treads of the road
> Lay clouded, polished pale and chalked with frost,
> Like the paraffin-sealed coverings of preserves.
> The very grass was a stiff lead-crystal gray,
> Though splendidly prismatic where the sun
> Made its slow way between the lingering shadows
> Of nearby fence posts and more distant trees.
> There was leisure enough to take full note of this
> In the most minute detail as the soldier held
> Steady his index finger on the trigger.
>
> It wasn't charity. Perhaps mere prudence,
> Saving a valuable round of ammunition
> For some more urgent crisis. Whatever it was,
> The soldier reslung his rifle on his shoulder,
> Turned wordlessly and walked on down the road
> The departed German vehicles had taken.
>
> There followed a long silence, a long silence.
> For years they lived together in that house,
> Though daily tasks, through all the family meals,
> In agonized, unviolated silence.

The poem works as a palimpsest, overlaying the biblical narrative with the modern in a way that sheds light on both. Certain biblical

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commentators have suggested that, in the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham, in fact, is testing God. In this interpretation, Abraham has no intention of killing his son but raises the knife knowing that God will not make him go through with it. If He does, then Abraham will know that He is not a God worth following. Clearly, Hecht sees this differently.

Ultimately, the story of the French father and the German soldier shows the father as the greater villain. The soldier, acting out of expediency, puts the father in an unspeakable situation, yet the father needs only to hand over the bicycle to save his son. This he refuses to do. The soldier, not the father, then shows mercy on the boy. The poem casts a bleak light on the biblical story, suggesting that God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son for no good reason, for a bicycle. Was Abraham right to agree to the sacrifice? God and the soldier call off the death in the end, but the resulting rift between father and son, the silence that ensues, marks both Hecht's poem and the biblical tale with extreme bitterness.

As a further indictment of the father, Hecht includes the long passage of description in which the reader receives a tour of the landscape. The father has plenty of time to reconsider his decision, yet he keeps silent. Unlike Abraham, the father has no reason to hope that the soldier will rescind his terrible threat. Hecht places his characters in moments of crisis, which so often reveal them as failing to do the right thing. Think of the Pole in "More Light! More Light!," who initially refuses to bury alive two Jews until he is threatened with the same fate. Ultimately, he gives in and is shot anyway. The Pole bleeds to death over a number of hours "Which grew to be years, and every day came mute/ Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,/ And settled upon his eyes in a black soot."

Hecht understands the crucial difference between morality and moralizing. He never places himself above the reader. Even his satiric pieces, usually in dramatic voices, don't excoriate their subjects in a way that suggests the poet flies free of similar failings. As he tells Philip Hoy, for example, "The speaker in my poem ["Green: An Epistle"], who is admittedly partly me, has succeeded in deceiving himself into believing that his long-suffering patience and forbearance, his stoic endurance, have paid off in the form of a noble and selfless character, and in this he is profoundly mistaken." Other dramatic monologues, such as "The Venetian Vespers," similarly indict an invented persona that is partly Hecht himself. At the end of "Green," Hecht deftly overlays the recognition of the sin of pride with the recognition of the presence of pride in the self:

> Or, like a sunbather, whose lids retain
> A greenish, gemmed impression of the sun
> In lively, fluctuant geometries,
> You sometimes contemplate a single image,
> Utterly silent, utterly at rest.
> It is of someone, a stranger, quite unknown,
> Sitting alone in a foreign-looking room,
> Gravely intent at a table propped with
> matchbooks,
> Writing this very poem—about me.

It is to Hecht's great credit as a writer and as a moralist that he takes pains not to delude himself. His constant scrutiny of the wiles of vice penetrates beneath the blandishment of the ego. He does not spare his own amour propre, nor does he spare the reader's. In this sense, reading Hecht can be a challenging experience, difficult not on the level of intelligibility, as with so many poets writing after modernism, but on the level of moral accounting. It takes a strong stomach to turn our attention inward on our own failings, as Hecht's poems demand that we do. Prudence, self-scrutiny, culpability, and the snares of self-deception and pride: for the melancholy consideration of these and other matters of moral consequence readers may find it hard to give thanks to Anthony Hecht, yet it will mark some measure of their humanity if they do.

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The three voices of contemporary poetry

by Charles Martin

We think of ourselves as *having* voices, but these days our poets *are* voices. That is to say, the word "voice" has come to be synonymous with the word "poet" in all of those venues in which we discuss poetry, ranging from critical essays and reviews to the blurbs on the backs of the poets' books. If I had entitled my essay "New Voices in American Poetry," you would have expected to read about some new young poets, emerging, even as nations do, from the backdrop of their obscurity. A recent blurb describes such a recently emerged poet as one of the "best new voices in American poetry." This identification of poetry with voice is in fact so much of a commonplace as to be largely unnoticeable to us and something that we do not object to when we do notice it.

Despite the ubiquity of the usage, it was not always so: John Dryden and Alexander Pope did not speak of a poet's "voice," but of his "thought," and in his "Essay on Criticism," Pope famously described the poet's task as that of producing "What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed." Thought, in Pope's familiar formulation, represents itself as something highly conventional: the often-thought is something that men of common sense would find themselves in agreement on; the poet's task is to make that consensus memorable through the expressive powers of his genius, which, unlike that of the modern poet, can only function in a social context. A poet in Pope's time could not substitute his own voice, his own intentions, for the expectations of his audience without inviting the ridicule of his audience.

Over the years, however, poetry as thought was gradually supplanted by poetry as the representation of a voice, either individual or collective, until, in the twentieth century, Robert Frost on the side of tradition and William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson on the side of radical innovation would have found themselves in agreement on little else but the idea of poetry as the representation of an individual voice.

In the middle of the last century, when T. S. Eliot wrote the essay from which I have taken most of my title, "The Three Voices of Poetry," he had in mind an older idea of voice as a poet's mode of relating (or of not relating) to an audience, rather than the contemporary sense of poetic voice as a means of individuation, without reference to any real or possible audience: to put it another way, nothing more is posited of a new voice than that it should be, to the extent that this is possible, unprecedented. What Eliot said was this: "The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is

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saying not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character."

To anyone familiar with the contemporary scene in poetry, a revision of Eliot's triadic division might seem necessary. For one thing, little is left of Eliot's third voice as represented by the kind of dramatic poetry that was of great interest to him personally, and which must have seemed, when he wrote his essay in 1953, to have a great future. These days, having virtually disappeared from the stage, dramatic poetry seems to have only a great past. We are occasionally treated to a revival of one of Richard Wilbur's wonderful translations of Molière, or to one of the Greek classics translated into some kind of verse, but, with the exception of operas, there does not seem to be any contemporary verse drama at all in the United States. There is, of course, Tony Harrison in England, but his work is rarely seen over here. The other aspect of Eliot's third voice, the poet speaking to others as someone else, in a dramatic monologue or a short story in verse or verse novel, is similarly rare.

The near-disappearance of Eliot's third voice may have something to do with the fact that the domain of Eliot's first voice, that of the poet speaking to himself or to no one, has expanded considerably, in ways that he might not have foreseen. The private voice seems everywhere in poetry today. It may be argued that poetry began to lose its audience not when poets began talking to themselves or to no one—poets have always done that sort of thing—but when they began doing it as though there were no other choice, as though the possibilities for dramatic or reciprocal speech did not exist.

Touchstones for this kind of poetry abound at each stage of the modernist experiment. A teacher of mine flew into a rage at how the very young Ezra Pound had presented a translation of a few scraps by Sappho ("Spring . . . Too long . . . Gongula.") as a poem in itself, entitled "Papyrus." When I began reading contemporary poetry in the 1960s, the slender, enigmatic poems of Robert Creeley seemed, as he might himself have said, to offer instances of unprecedented utterance. One of the most interesting of these is "The Pattern":

> As soon as
> I speak, I
> speaks. It
>
> wants to
> be free but
> impassive lies
>
> in the direction
> of its
> words. Let
>
> x equal x, x
> also
> equals x. I
>
> speak to
> hear myself
> speak? I
>
> had not thought
> that some-
> thing had such
>
> undone. It
> was an idea
> of mine.

Reading Creeley's poem back then, and even now, retyping his aggressively teeny lines with their ferocious enjambments, one realized that this was the work of a man determined to frustrate the expectations of his audience. The effect was dizzying. If we think of Creeley's poem as a special instance of Eliot's first voice, however, much about it becomes clear. I say a special instance, in that Creeley appears to be speaking to himself, or to no one, because there are no other options. The subject of his poem is, in fact, the impossibility of reciprocal discourse: "As soon as/ I speak, I/ speaks." The

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self that speaks creates a self aware of itself speaking, interposing that self-awareness between the speaker and the audience. This was heady stuff once upon a time, and it still has some of its magic left. It raises, in a way that is difficult to argue with—it isn't easy to argue with someone talking to himself—the poet's sense of his own isolation as well as the impossibility of using language to render that isolation less absolute. There is of course the risk that the poem written about the impossibility of discourse may do no more than prove its own case, but experience suggests that, in the hands of a master ironist like John Ashbery or Donald Justice, the possibilities for playfulness are considerable. There is another voice current in contemporary poetry, resembling the private voice in its refusal of reciprocal speech, but different in its intention. I have taken to thinking of it as the prophetic voice, in that its intention is to speak for, rather than to, another. Touchstones are rather less common for the prophetic voice, since it has never achieved the popularity of the private voice, but here, from the period when I began to encounter this kind of poetry on a fairly regular basis, the 1970s, is a poem called "Rape" by Adrienne Rich:

> There is a cop who is both prowler and father:
> he comes from your block, grew up with your brothers,
> has certain ideals.
> You hardly know him in his boots and silver badge,
> On horseback, one hand touching his gun.

As the poet goes on to describe the cop taking a statement from the victim of a rape, she indicts him for the vicarious pleasure he takes in the woman's violation:

> And you see his blue eyes, the blue eyes of all the family
> Whom you used to know, grow narrow and glisten,
> His hand types out the details
> And he wants them all
> But the hysteria in your voice pleases him best.

Despite the power of Rich's voice, the poem has always seemed to me to be radically unfair. Of course policemen are no doubt no better and worse than the rest of us, so an artist should be allowed to show the evil that they, like the rest of us, are capable of. The problem with the poem is that there really is not enough specificity in the description either of the "you" or her interrogator; they are made to stand for all victims of rape and for all cops taking down all rape victims' statements; there are no other possibilities. If one feels that it is unfair to him, one must also feel that it is unfair to her also, for nowhere in the poem does she have the opportunity to speak for herself, to correct even the slightest detail of the poet's account. The poet speaks for her because the poet knows best. What one finds in poems written in the prophetic voice is a situation seen as universal and a poet speaking for those who are presumed to be unable to speak for themselves.

At around the same time that the private and the prophetic voices came into their own in American poetry, I became aware of another kind of poetry, written in what I have come to think of as the reciprocal voice. If poems written in the private and prophetic voices took as their frequent subject the impossibility of discourse between writer and autonomous reader, the reciprocal voice had as one of its themes the necessity of such discourse. Much, though not all, of the poetry of the reciprocal voice seemed (and seems) to be written in meter, and the most reasonable explanation of this phenomenon is the conventionality of metrical verse, the fact that it is written out of long-standing agreements between writer and reader, agreements which may be bent or questioned by either party but not unilaterally done away with.

Those of us who came to awareness in the 1960s and 1970s were struck by the swift and apparently irresistible rise of free verse at that time. Surely this would not have been the case had there not been the perception among many young (and not so

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young) poets that writing metrical verse could no longer be justified, aesthetically or morally. Much of the rejection of metrical verse at this time was, I believe, a rejection of the voice that asserted the possibility of a reciprocal response between autonomous individuals. Many of us indeed felt that this kind of voice was impossible, that it could only be realized by the use of conventions that were if not immoral, at least outmoded. For me, at this time, the poet who demonstrated the fallacy of this position was Anthony Hecht, in his book *The Hard Hours*; the poem that most impressed me as a challenge to this attitude was Richard Wilbur's "For the Student Strikers," a poem written for an anti-war protest held at Wesleyan in the spring of 1970:

> Go talk to those who are rumored to be
> unlike you,
> And whom, it is said, you are so unlike.
> Stand on the stoops of their houses and tell
> them why
> You are out on strike.
>
> It is not time for the rock, the bullet, the blunt
> Slogan that fuddles the mind toward force.
> Let the new sound of our streets be the
> patient sound
> Of our discourse.
>
> Doors will be shut in your faces, I do not
> doubt.
> Yet here and there, it may be, there will start,
> Much as the lights blink on in a block at
> evening,
> Changes of heart.
>
> They are your houses; the people are not
> unlike you;
> Talk with them then and let it be done
> Even for the grey wife of your nightmare
> sheriff
> And the guardsman's son.

Wilbur asserts the need, an almost paradoxical urgency, to respond with civility even to violence, to recognize that even these apparently insensible antagonists are fellow citizens who must be presumed capable of responding to rational argument and to a plea for self-interest; it was, after all, the guardsman's son who would be the likeliest victim of the war, not the protesting students. Though the poem was written at the students' request, Wilbur writes that it "was at first thrown into the wastebasket . . . but was later retrieved and published." That is the kind of thing that happens regularly to poems written in the reciprocal voice, the poem that can be argued with, and even—eventually—fished out of the wastebasket and published.

The three voices of contemporary poetry still seem to me to be alive and well at present. The practitioners of the private voice thrive, actually, and, over the last thirty years or so, that voice has mutated into various schools: the confessional, the surreal, the solipsistic, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and beyond. It has become our new academic poetry and will continue to thrive as long as our universities stay open. The prophetic voice is seen less often than it used to be, but it too has found an academic home among those who have no problem in speaking for others, and so it need not be worried about.

Even the reciprocal voice and its practitioners seem to be doing well, though they would seem to have more responsibilities than pleasures: with the only premodern voice still left on the scene, they are stuck with the weight of an old prosodic tradition and thus have always the burden of trying to make something new of the previously used; they cannot be voices in the current sense of the word, for their relationship with their readers must be reciprocal; "original" and "unprecedented" are both beyond them, though they can recognize the appeal of both; they must sit facing the audience, on a worn-out picnic blanket, making up stories, singing songs, posing riddles that the others can take away with them. It seems to me amazing that they've done this well for this long.

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Free of our humbug: notes on Basil Bunting

by Christian Wiman

All through my twenties I read Basil Bunting with a kind of avid awe. The sounds and forms of his poems seemed to me at once remote and exemplary, too singular to learn from in any direct way, perhaps, and yet guiding examples nonetheless. I loved the aural imperative of the verse, which you hear before you understand, or which, in a sense, to hear *is* to understand. I loved the dense textures, the sculpted syllables, the way the lines seem almost to bristle with contempt for anything extraneous or merely ornamental. Most of all, I loved the way you can feel the form of this poetry over large stretches of verse, the way it accretes without losing precision, is in some major way as abstract as music yet never loses specificity. You cannot exhaust a poetry like this:

> A mason times his mallet
> to a lark's twitter,
> listening while the marble rests,
> lays his rule
> at a letter's edge,
> fingertips checking,
> till the stone spells a name
> naming none,
> a man abolished.
> Painful lark, labouring to rise!
> The solemn mallet says:
> In the grave's slot
> he lies. We rot.

What I'm wondering, then, is why, at the age of thirty-seven, and not having read Bunting carefully for some years, should I have found making my way through his *Collected Poems* in the past few weeks *so damned hard*?

Bunting was born in Northumbria—Wordsworth country—but it took a long time for his life and work to find their way back there. (The best book on Bunting—indeed, one of the very best books on a single poet that I know of—is Peter Makin's *Bunting: The Shaping of His Verse*.) He had a modernist's life, in a sense—Paris and Rapallo, Pound and Eliot and Yeats, the range of languages and learning, the romp through cultures and times. He was in the mix.

And yet, in a way, he wasn't. Bunting's first substantial book didn't come out until he was fifty, so he was always a very marginal figure. Even more than that, though, Bunting was *in* life in a way that Eliot, with his fastidious repressions and deflections, and Pound, with his dogged intellectualization of everything, and even Yeats at times, with his masques and mysticism, weren't. Bunting had no time for theories, programs, or dogma of any sort and could be searing in his contempt of them. He lived and wrote very close to the ground.

Close, but not rooted, at least not until late in life. Restive, self-educated, fiercely independent, Bunting lived with great range and at great risk. He worked as an editor, a sailor, a music critic; he was a

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foreign correspondent for the *Times* in his forties, a lowly proofreader for a provincial newspaper in his fifties. He lived at sea—alone—for a year. He went from serving rough prison time as a conscientious objector during World War I to being head of all British intelligence in Persia in World War II. It says something about his character that neither of these roles was out of character. *Briggflatts*, his masterpiece, and certainly one of the best poems of the twentieth century, is governed both by a contemplative quietism that Bunting associated with Quakerism and the violence that he saw both forging and deforming culture through the centuries. Can a meditation be both focused and raucous? That's what *Briggflatts* feels like.

To read Bunting is mostly to read that poem. He didn't write much. Even a casual glance at the dates of composition reveals long years of silence between poems. Pound's influence is everywhere in the early work, and there is very little that doesn't seem either merely precocious or massively pretentious. The series of "sonatas" that Bunting wrote from his mid-thirties on can be striking in random moments, and some of the brief odes are fully intact and truly beautiful. It's strange, though, how consistently provisional—or perhaps peripheral—it all feels, how there seems to be no coherent center from which the poems issue until *Briggflatts*—which, by the way, was begun when Bunting was well past sixty. If he hadn't written that poem, I'm not sure we'd read him now.

Briggflatts, then. If I tell you that the poem is about lost love—or, more accurately, renounced love—I will have told you everything and nothing. The opening section—which is just a knockout, the best thing Bunting ever wrote—tells the story of a boy and girl in their teens accompanying her father, who is a stonemason, to a graveyard to erect a tombstone, then going back to the girl's house, where the boy and girl make love. That's it, really. The rest of the poem is about poetry, history, devotion, delight, despair. There is a good deal of description of landscape, all splendid. Only near the end does the poem become unexpectedly direct again, when we learn the full force of that early experience, and the pain and regret that, it seems, the poet has both preserved and suffered his entire life:

> Fifty years a letter unanswered;
> a visit postponed for fifty years.
>
> She has been with me fifty years.
>
> Starlight quivers. I had day enough.
> For love uninterrupted night.

Bunting called the poem an "autobiography." He also claimed that his poems were for "unabashed boys and girls" to enjoy. Bunting could be a bit coy. If *Briggflatts* is autobiographical, it's autobiographical in the way *The Waste Land* is: tracking down every reference in the poem to an event in the life is a fool's errand. And if you've got an unabashed boy or girl lolling around your house reading Bunting right now—friend, you've got a problem.

The poem is difficult, and it's ridiculous to pretend otherwise. It does work at a primary aural level that is available, I think, to any reasonably intelligent person who is willing to read slowly and *aloud* (Bunting: "Reading in silence is the source of half the misconceptions that have caused the public to distrust poetry"), and I don't think that a genuine experience of the poem necessitates recognizing every allusion and tying together the many, many lacunae. Still, your experience will be considerably enhanced if you know something about St. Cuthbert, Eric Bloodaxe, Aneurin and Taliesin, the Lindisfarne Gospels, Dante, sonata form, Domenico Scarlatti, and the navigational techniques of Nordic Vikings. Bunting himself is little help. "Notes are a confession of failure," he said, "not a palliation of it."

Here's what I did. I read through the poems—not successfully. I re-read that Makin book. I read all of Bunting's prose I could find, including the recently published

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lectures he delivered to students late in his life in Vancouver (Mercilessly dull!—I think he wanted to turn them all into bankers). It made no sense to write a negative review of the poems, because I knew (I could *hear*), even in the midst of my resistance to them, that they were great. The only solution was to bring that resistance into my reading, and thus, into my review.

I am tired of the techniques of modernism, tired of the allusiveness, the fragments, the difficulty, tired of the emphasis *on* technique. As deeply as I believe in the power of language to express meaning abstractly, and as much as I love poets like Crane and Eliot, whose ambitions were like Bunting's in this regard, more and more I want an art that is tied to life more directly. This is a complicated matter with Bunting, though. Bunting's great fear was words uttered in excess of knowledge, and by knowledge he meant lived experience. In terms of precision of observation, concision of language, and veracity of detail, the line between life and art is very tight indeed in his work. In another way, though, the life of the poems is constantly being subsumed by the style.

Bunting had a son he never saw. His American wife, pregnant at the time, left him and went with their two daughters back to Indiana. I don't know the moral dynamics of the situation. What I do know is that Bunting wrote a lovely poem many years later when he got word of his son's death. Here is the first stanza of "Song for Rustam":

> Tears are for what can be mended,
> not for a voyage ended
> the day the schooner put out.
> Short fear and sudden quiet
> too deep for a diving thief.
> Tears are for easy grief.

Two things are interesting about this poem. First, it has a specific occasion, which makes it nearly anomalous among Bunting's work (and rare among the work of the high modernists in general). Like the adolescent love scene from *Briggflatts*, "Song for Rustam" is more direct, clearer, and more immediate than anything else Bunting wrote. The other interesting thing about the poem, though, is simply what it's saying: *Tears are for easy grief*. The line implies both a psychology and an aesthetic. Any feeling that is too immediate is too easy, and it is not to be trusted until it has been turned into something else. "Take no notice of tears," the poet exhorts himself—or Bloodaxe rather, the figure into whom he's suddenly dissolved at the end of Section I of *Briggflatts*—"lest/ insufferable happiness impede/ flight to Stainmore," which is to make loss the fuel of all accomplishment, and all experience the ghost of some lost ideal ("He lies with one to long for another"). And what is accomplishment? For Bunting, more than anything else, it was poetry. And what is the lost ideal? "All arts," he wrote, "are concerned only with form in the end."

Well, I don't buy it—though I have long bought it, have even peddled these notions myself. As lovely and direct as "Song for Rustam" is, there remains something weirdly occluded about it, something brusque, something—I hesitate to say this—simulated. The same is true of the grief in *Briggflatts*. I simply don't *believe* the feeling expressed in some of the lines I've quoted about this singular lost intensity, this fifty-year-old grief. It seems to me very "literary." You're not a man at sixteen, you're a gland. To locate your life's ideal in that instant is, finally, deeply sentimental, and there is a direct connection between this psychological occlusion or willed immaturity and the idolatry of form, or technique, or style—whatever you want to call it.

Art is about more than form in the end. It is also about life, about truth—and not simply the kind of musical truth that Bunting claimed for the autobiographical element of *Briggflatts*, but something much more basic and accessible. Don't misunderstand me: when I argue for a more direct connection between life and art, I don't necessarily mean the *poet's* life. Lord knows that tendency has run amok. I do believe,

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though, that poetry must attend as scrupulously, cling as fiercely, to the breadth and mess of experience as it does to the forms that are its essence. Bunting tilted the scales too heavily toward the latter, as did Crane and Eliot, whose general statements about life or efforts at wisdom are similarly compromised.

Of course, as Eliot himself said, it isn't the job of a poet to convince us of what he believes, but *that* he believes. Crane and Eliot were better at this than Bunting, if only because they were both more given over to their respective delusions. And that's the real rub: I don't think *Bunting* believed in his own grief, at least not in these instances I've noted. *Briggflatts* was prompted by a visit from a young poet and Bunting's subsequent desire "to write something for these younger chaps to read." As always you have to take into account Bunting's tendency to be coy and dismissive in his comments on his own work, but the subject matter does feel a bit trumped-up, feels very much *like* subject matter. And here is how "Song for Rustam" ends:

> Truth that shone is dim,
> lies cripple every limb.
> Where you were, you are not.
> Silent, heavy air
> stifles the heart's leap.
> Truth is asleep.

When I told a friend, a good poet and professor, that I was going to write something about Bunting, she said that she'd never really read him, and then expressed dismay at how some poets simply vanished. This surprised me, both the fact that she hadn't read Bunting and the perception that he was overlooked. Subsequent conversations, though, both with poets and non-poets, have convinced me that my friend's experience is not at all anomalous. Bunting is still somewhat off the radar.

He shouldn't be. There are English poets of the past half-century whom I would recommend above Bunting—Heaney, Hughes, and Larkin, notably. And I do think that Bunting might have been a better poet if he hadn't come of age during modernism, or at least had been more resistant to its most reader-resistant characteristics. But there are effects and intensities in Bunting that few poets of any time can touch. I don't know of anyone who could more utterly fuse sight and sound:

> Wind shakes a blotch of sun,
> flatter and tattle willow and oak alike
> sly as a trout's shadow on gravel

or carve language so closely to what Bunting called "the structure of event" that to read the lines aloud is to feel the physical fact of what they describe:

> Crew grunt and gasp. Nothing he sees
> they see, but hate and serve. Unscarred ocean,
> day's swerve, swell's poise, pursuit,
> he blends, balances, drawing leagues under
> the keel
> to raise cold cliffs where tides
> knot fringes of weed

or make a music that so steadfastly refuses to rise above physical facts, refuses to be separate from *things*:

> Under sacks on the stone
> two children lie,
> hear the horse stale,
> the mason whistle,
> harness mutter to shaft,
> felloe to axle squeak,
> rut thud the rim,
> crushed grit

or so often simply take your breath away with the beauty of individual passages:

> Furthest, fairest things, stars, free of our
> humbug,
> each his own, the longer known the more
> alone,
> wrapt in emphatic fire roaring out to a black
> flue.

Articulating my own objections to Bunt-

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ing's work mostly dissolved them. You can't read poetry with some ideal conception of it in mind any more than you can live that way. I am not moved by the ostensible subjects of Bunting's poetry and find myself frustrated if I attend too closely to the poems at basic levels of narrative and psychology. The way to read Bunting, I think, is to trust him utterly at the level of music, and little at the level of subject matter.

Read this way, the poems can be quite moving, in part simply for the fact of their deflections. I think what Bunting meant in "Song for Rustam," finally, though he may very well not have known it, is not that tears are for easy grief, but that tears are for specific grief. And what that poem laments is less the specific loss than the inability to fully feel it—the inability *ever* to have fully felt it. *Briggflatts* is no different, a vast soundscape in which the real grief can never quite be found, either because the poet couldn't see it himself, or wouldn't let himself see it, or simply because the grief is so much deeper than any detail of his own life—*lachrymae rerum*. Bunting seems implicitly to acknowledge this last possibility by attaching a coda to the poem, which, like most everything he wrote, is at once close and remote, strangely incomplete and utterly finished:

> A strong song tows
> us, long earsick.
> Blind, we follow
> rain slant, spray flick
> to fields we do not know.
>
> Night, float us.
> Offshore wind, shout,
> ask the sea
> what's lost, what's left,
> what horn sunk,
> what crown adrift.
>
> Where we are who knows
> of kings who sup
> while day fails? Who,
> swinging his axe
> to fell kings, guesses
> where we go?

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Reflections on the oldest profession

by Theodore Dalrymple

As a child, I must have passed an old pub called the Spaniards Inn, on the road between Hampstead and Highgate, a thousand times. The road narrowed there to a single lane, causing hold-ups to the traffic, because on the other side of the road was an old toll keeper's cottage. Here, modern life had to defer to the preservation of historic buildings. It was all very romantic, except for drivers in a hurry, who were (and still are) exasperated at having to wait their turn to pass between the Spaniards and the cottage.

It always thrilled me to go through that narrowing in the road, not because it was our turn at last, but because I believed, as soon as I was old enough to remember the inn's name, that the famous highwayman Dick Turpin had jumped from its upper window straight onto the back of his equally famous mare, Black Bess, to escape the arresting officers, and then rode straight to York without stopping. (The bar on the second floor of the inn is still called the Turpin Bar.) Soon after his arrival in York, in 1739, he was hanged, which was a bit of a shame because he was such a handsome gentleman, who was gallant and charming to ladies, and who robbed the rich only to succour the poor. I suppose I must have come by this knowledge somehow, yet it seemed to have communicated itself to me directly, without intermediary, via the atmosphere: at any rate, it was the kind of thing that everyone knew.

For forty years, I thought no further of Dick Turpin, but having accumulated rather more knowledge of human nature than I possessed then, and having through my work made the acquaintance of some hundreds of robbers, I was not really surprised to read in a newly published book, *Dick Turpin: The Myth of the English Highwayman*,[1] that he was not a gentleman at all, but a cruel, cowardly, unscrupulous, murderous villain, a career criminal, who thought nothing of the rape of the servants of the households he and his gang broke into, or of beating old people to extract from them the whereabouts of their money. He was without redeeming features, even physically, being heavily pockmarked by the smallpox. He never had a horse called Black Bess, and though he did indeed make his way to York, it was not in the dramatic fashion of the legend. As for the Spaniards Inn, it is unlikely that he was ever there, since the building, though of sixteenth century origin, was not used as an inn until after his death. There was nothing romantic about him in the least.

It turns out that my knowledge of Turpin (if one can be said to know something that is not true) was derived from a novel by Harrison Ainsworth, who was famous in the 1830s and 1840s, but is now almost forgotten except by specialists. In 1834,

1 *Dick Turpin: The Myth of the English Highwayman*, by James Sharpe; Profile Books, 276 page, £15.99.

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Ainsworth published a gothic novel called *Rookwood*, in which Turpin appeared in a sub-plot. This was the resurrection of the highwayman's reputation, who—though notorious in his own day—had been almost entirely forgotten in the meantime. It was Ainsworth, not history in Leopold von Ranke's sense, that gave us Black Bess and the ride to York. My thrill was pure ersatz.

It is curious how a novel, not merely unread but quite unheard of, could have exerted such an effect upon me, and presumably on many others.

My early knowledge of burglars was derived from British comics, in which they always appeared as jolly coves dressed in black and white hooped jerseys, with a bag slung over their back marked "Swag," to help the rather dim officers of the law find them out. (Today's equivalent would be the minor drug dealers who have themselves tattooed all over with bright green cannabis leaves.) When finally caught, the burglars in the comics always said, with great good humor, "It's a fair cop, guv." We could laugh at them in those days, because there were so few of them, our houses were not broken into, and they were so endearing: for they were thieves with hearts of gold.

My other source of information about burglars and burglary was the work of E. W. Hornung, possibly a distant ancestor of mine. He invented the character of A. J. Raffles, the gentleman-burglar. For Raffles, crime was a game, in the sense of the motto inscribed on a frieze outside Lord's Cricket Ground in St. John's Wood: Play up, play up, and play the game! When Raffles fails to relieve a vulgar South African diamond magnate of his diamond shirt studs, the failure does not upset him: it is the gallantry of the attempt that counts.

What mattered to Raffles was the outward form with which one did something, not its moral meaning. (The first Raffles book, *The Amateur Cracksman*, was published in 1899, and was a manifestation of fin de siècle aestheticism, transposed to crime literature. When Raffles's partner in crime, an old school chum called Bunny, objects that a theft is not necessary because they are still in funds, Raffles replies, "Necessity, my dear Bunny? . . . You pain me, my dear chap. Art for art's sake is a vile catchword, but I confess it appeals to me. In this case my motives are absolutely pure . . . if I don't have a try . . . I shall never be able to hold up my head again.") The thrill and fun of burglary, not avarice or the vulgar desire for accumulation, were what impelled him. He was idle but clever, languid but energetic, nonchalant but aesthetically discriminating. He was effortlessly superior. His gentle birth gave him an entrée into the highest society, and he was never at a loss as to what to say to a dowager duchess, though he could disguise himself in rags and pass himself off as a denizen of Whitechapel in London's East End. Morality was for him a petit bourgeois prejudice, not at all *comme il faut*:

> Raffles would plan a fresh enormity, or glory in the last, with the unmitigated enthusiasm of the artist. It was frankly impossible to imagine one throb or twitter of compunction beneath those frankly egoistic and infectious transports.

Being *comme il faut* was his highest, indeed his only, good.

Armed with this information about the life of burglars, derived from comics and E. W. Hornung, I met my first burglar. He was also a safe-breaker, but of no professional distinction. He was admitted to the hospital in which I was working as a junior doctor. Until then, it had never really occurred to me that someone might actually, in real life as against in fiction, live by stealing. He was a small man who struck me as pathetic and frightened rather than amoral and assured, like Raffles. It turned out that he was not without cunning, however (cunning is the intelligence of the stupid): there was nothing medically wrong with him, and he was using the hospital to hide from the police, such being the twentieth-century

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equivalent of sanctuary. He seemed to be possessed of a sixth sense, for no sooner had he left the hospital than the police showed up, desultorily searching for him.

He told me lugubriously that his last safe-breaking job had not been an outstanding success. He had been informed—misinformed, actually—that a safe of a kind easily broken into was stuffed with cash. He broke into the premises and found the safe all right, but the safe proved much harder to crack than he had anticipated. In fact, it took him several hours, and when finally it yielded to his wiles, he found an almost empty packet of Woodbines, a brand of cheap cigarette, in it, and nothing else. Oh well, you win some and you lose some: he sat down to smoke one of the two cigarettes, to console himself for his fruitless hours of labor. It was then that the police arrived. If you added the prison time to his hours of labor, he could by honest toil have earned a million Woodbines.

During his stay in the hospital, another patient on the ward announced that some money she had had in her locker had gone missing. The burglar and safe-breaker had the motive, the opportunity, and the necessary character. Moreover, he had an artificial leg, which would make a very convenient hiding place for the cash. Flushed with pride at my powers of deduction, I made the burglar take off his artificial leg, despite his ridiculous protestations of innocence, and I tipped it upside down, and shook it. No money fell out. I shook it again, because I was sure that it was there, but it wasn't. Obviously he had hidden it somewhere else, somewhere less obvious. Then the patient who said the money was missing announced that she had found it again, exactly where she had put it. The burglar enjoyed for once the pleasure of being in the right, and savored his triumph as I sheepishly apologized to him. Secretly, I still believed in his guilt: he had stolen the money, but had returned it when a hue and cry broke out on the ward. By such ad hoc subterfuges do we preserve ourselves from acknowledging our mistakes.

I learned from this experience not to jump too hastily to conclusions, even about inveterate wrongdoers. But I also learned what my subsequent experience, which includes an acquaintance with several hundred burglars at least, has confirmed, namely not to place too great a reliance on a haphazard knowledge of imaginative literature for an accurate picture of the world. For example, not one among the burglars I have known has ever echoed Raffles's brief attempt, made purely en passant, to justify his activities, to the effect that the distribution of property of property in society is all wrong anyway, though it is true that I have known a few "ethical" burglars who claimed never to steal from the old or from children, and one who stole antiques from country houses on the grounds that the owners could easily afford their losses. Acquisitive crime has no grand motive or justification in the minds of those who commit it: burglary is not a conscious revenge on abstract economic injustice, but an attempt to acquire what it would otherwise take time and diligence to acquire.

My first acquaintance with prostitution was likewise literary. The bawds of Shakespeare were known to me before the facts of life; but I saw at once, without knowing exactly what was morally wrong with her, than an evening with Mistress Overdone would be far more fun than one with the righteous Isabella.

My first full contact with a prostitute, though, was in Maupassant. Astonishing, indeed incredible, as it may now seem, considering that I am not yet perfectly ancient, but only into that personal epoch that my piano teacher, while helping himself to a second slice of cream sponge, called middle-age spread, Maupassant was considered in my childhood to be a rather dangerous and unreliable author, at least for the tender young mind. When the BBC televized dramatizations of some of his stories, parents were advised to ensure that their children were safely tucked up in bed: in those days, evidently, it was still possible to corrupt youth.

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But I was educated at the time of the great instauration, when self-control became the queen of the pathogens. Maupassant was taught to me in school, I think, not only because he wrote French of such exemplary limpidity, but at least as much because he could be used to undermine the bourgeois moral certainties that appeared to the intellectuals of the time to have congealed as unattractively as mutton fat on a cold plate, and that impeded their access to immediate self-gratification.

Be that as it may, it was *Boule de Suif* and *La Maison Tellier* that I read. The lesson of these stories was that true virtue was not incompatible with easy virtue, that the externals of conventional morality often concealed a deep inner cynicism and amorality, and that goodness of heart and generosity of spirit were to be found in those whom the respectable of the world usually despised. These were lessons that were grateful to the ear of the age.

Boule de Suif takes place immediately after the Prussian victory in the Franco-Prussian War. A group of people travel in a coach from Rouen to Dieppe, in the hope of reaching Le Havre, which is still controlled by the French. Among them are a local aristocrat, an unscrupulous wine-dealer, and a cotton merchant, as well as their wives and two nuns. They are the respectable party. Then there is Boule de Suif (literally Ball of Tallow), a fat and jolly prostitute.

Their journey is in the middle of winter, and takes far longer than anticipated. Boule de Suif is the only one who has had the foresight to bring provisions, which she shares with the other passengers, whose hunger overcomes their reluctance to enter into relations with such a fallen creature.

They reach an inn where they intend to stay the night, and where the local Prussian commander is billeted. Although they have prior authority from a Prussian general to continue their journey, the local officer refuses them that permission, unless Boule de Suif agrees to submit to his amorous advances. At first, and only very briefly, the respectable passengers are united with Boule de Suif in her outraged and patriotic refusal to comply, but after the elapse of a day, their attitude changes. They send the innkeeper to propose to the Prussian officer that they continue on their journey while Boule de Suif remains, but he rejects the proposal out of hand. Then they find arguments as to why Boule de Suif should submit: she is a prostitute anyway, so one more liaison won't matter much, and many famous women have sacrificed their virtue for their countries; the nuns find examples of saints who allowed themselves to be ravaged for God's sake.

In the end, Boule de Suif submits to the Prussian officer's demands, and the next day they are all able to continue on their journey. But having demanded this sacrifice of her, the respectable party now despises her, as a fallen woman, for having made it. The final insult is that they will not share their provisions, which they bought at the inn while she was buying their release with her body, with her.

It is all so brilliantly done—a triumphant vindication of Flaubert's intense tuition of Maupassant—that you cannot help but be outraged on Boule de Suif's behalf. Because of Maupassant's narrative technique, his refusal to comment in the authorial voice, and his use of unemotive language, you don't realize how the dice have been loaded and your feelings manipulated. Boule de Suif is the only character in the story with a good heart; she is jolly and generous, and is shamelessly exploited by the "respectable" passengers. Bourgeois morality is revealed as a veneer, a hypocritical pretense that is stripped away at the first intimation of inconvenience. Even the patriotism of the bourgeoisie is skin-deep and far less important to them than attachment to property (echoing Marx's dictum that capital has no homeland). Only the prostitute in the story, she who pursues an occupation despised by all right-thinking persons, has any real feeling for her country and fellow-citizens.

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La Maison Tellier is a small brothel in the Normandy port of Fécamp, patronized by the local bourgeoisie. One day, Madame Tellier's brother, who lives in the countryside, invites her to his daughter's first communion. (He hopes that Madame Tellier, a childless widow, will leave her property to her, an instance of the peasant acquisitiveness that is a theme of Maupassant's writing. Madame Tellier's brother is not in the slightest concerned by the moral origins of her comparative wealth: for him, money is money and a house is a house. If Maupassant excoriates the bourgeoisie, he has no illusions about the peasantry.)

Madame Tellier, having no deputy, has to take her staff of prostitutes with her to the communion. The villagers where it takes place are deeply impressed by their finery and sophistication, and during the service, the prostitutes, remembering the innocence of their own childhoods, experience an epiphany, and communicate their religious ecstasy by sobs and tears to the whole congregation. Towards the end of the service, the priest says:

> "My dear brethren and sisters, and children, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. You have just given me the greatest joy of my life. I felt that God was down among us in response to my call. He came, He was there, present, filling your souls, causing your tears to overflow. I am the oldest priest in the diocese, and today I am the happiest. A miracle has taken place among us, a true, a great, a sublime miracle. While Jesus Christ was entering the bodies of these little children for the first time, the Holy Spirit, the celestial bird, the breath of God descended upon you, possessed you, seized you, and bent you like reeds in the wind."

The priest then turns to the prostitutes in particular:

> "I especially thank you, my dear sisters, who have come from such a distance, and whose presence among us, whose evident faith and ardent piety have set such a salutary example to all. You have edified my parish; your emotion has warmed all hearts; without you, this great day would not . . . have had this really divine character."

A lesser writer would have made the priest a figure of fun rather than of tragic misunderstanding. That a fleeting, if sincere, gust of religious emotion on the part of a group of hitherto insouciant prostitutes should have been for him the happiest moment of his life suggests that he has lived his entire life in a dream world of illusion, all the more poignant because he is so patently a good man. One doesn't laugh at his noble but uncomprehending speech: one is seized by an immense sorrow for him, and for all those who live in similar illusion. Goodness is not such a common commodity in the world that one wishes it to be the product of such illusion.

The religious exultation of the moment cannot last, of course, and Madame Tellier's brother makes a drunken pass at one of her prostitutes, to the uproarious delight of the others, after lunch. And when Madame Tellier and her girls return to Fécamp, their bourgeois clientele, who have missed them sorely, throw a party. All is gaiety; there is dancing and champagne; and sensuality, good fun, generosity of spirit, true goodness, and deep feeling are all revealed as being perfectly compatible, provided we are broadminded and morally sophisticated enough. Because we are virtuous, there shall be cakes and ale.

Tolstoy, during his mystico-puritanical phase, wrote an essay on Maupassant in which he recognized his immense literary talent but condemned what he thought was the cheap, meretricious, amoral Parisian cynicism to which he subscribed. I think this is a mistake: Maupassant is not an amoralist, but a believer in human goodness that is not, however, identical to the strict observation, at least outwardly, of moral conventions. But it is certainly true that such is the power of Maupassant's narrative, so great is its verisimilitude, that one easily succumbs to the idea that he is telling us the

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truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This is not so; but until my mid-twenties, my mental image of prostitutes and prostitution was derived entirely from him.

I met my first prostitute to speak of in real life in the same hospital as I met my first burglar, at about the same time. She was middle-aged, but still working—after a fashion. Her physical charms had faded, for which she tried to compensate by layers of make-up, and her teeth had dropped out; the price she commanded, therefore, was very small. When she needed a cigarette, which was often, she would find someone with a packet to take her behind the nearest rubbish tip. A far cry from la Maison Tellier.

She was married to an idler who had long acted as her pimp, and who used, in her salad days, to send her out to earn the price of his dinner and sorties to the pub. By one of those terrible tricks that Nature sometimes plays upon those whom she wishes to drive mad, the prostitute loved this worthless man to distraction, and with an abiding passion. One day while she was a patient in the hospital he received compensation for an accident in which he had been involved, a huge sum in his circumstances, and he went out at once and bought a mauve car with leopardskin seats; he started to wear those lizard-skin shoes much favored by the business associates of African dictators. Her share of the compensation money was a packet of cigarettes that he did not even bring to the ward, but left at the hospital gate for the porter to deliver.

She would spend several hours each day repeatedly screeching "Bill!" in an unearthly tone of inconsolable longing, desolation, and despair that you could hear far down the road outside the hospital. It sounded as if she were being tortured, and in a way I suppose she was. No treatment assisted her in the least.

She was the subject of more than one case conference, in which learned physicians discoursed with admirable dispassion on the possible part that her partially treated neurosyphilis (the condition from which Maupassant himself went mad, and from which he eventually died). Everyone was agreed that it was a privilege to have such a case in hospital, because you don't see neurosyphilis much these days; the older physicians among them remembered the pre-penicillin days as a golden age of gummata and tabetic crises. General Paralysis of the Insane, GPI: why, young doctors don't even recognize the acronym these days.

Penicillin didn't cure her, however; she still screeched "Bill! Bill! Bill!" every day for several hours.

One morning, she was found dead in her hospital bed. There was a rumor that she had been poisoned by injection by one of the nurses, who was unable to tolerate her screams any longer. If so, I couldn't find it in my heart to blame him or her: an eight-hour shift with her unearthly tortured screeching was enough to turn anyone's idea of true morality. More than a quarter of a century later, I can still conjure up in my mind's ear those wounded animal cries of "Bill! Bill! Bill!," and I shall be able to do so until the day I die.

I realized that Maupassant was not a wholly reliable guide to the phenomenon of prostitution. There was more to it than jollity, the popping of champagne corks, and impromptu dancing.

Since then, I have treated a lot of prostitutes as patients. One claimed to be a world-class dominatrix, who jetted round the world to whip the prominent men of many countries on several continents, but for the most part, they have been creatures who look as if they have emerged from the canvases of Otto Dix, razzled by drugs and disease, with crumbling bones and wrinkled skin, beaten into submission by pimps festooned with gold chains and mouths full of redundant golden dentistry. A few have been of middle-class origin, attracted to the gutter by its antinomian glamour, but they have ended up in no better state than the rest.

There used to be prostitutes like that who solicited on the street where I live, until my

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next-door-neighbor-but-one organized a local campaign to drive them away. Perhaps it is a sign of my insufficient absorption of the lesson of Maupassant's stories, but until they were driven away I did not find the removal of used condoms from the bushes and the gutter outside my house a congenial task, and, in my heart of hearts, when I saw the municipal van doing its round to distribute free condoms to those whom we must now called sex workers (What are pimps? Sexual liaison co-ordinators?), all in the name of harm reduction, my feelings as a householder were stronger than those as a doctor, and I wished not that harm should be reduced, but that it should be maximized.

I do not regret my literary initiation into the world of crime and prostitution, and a world without literature would be, to me, an intolerable one, in which life would hardly be worth living. But had my life taken a different turn, had I not been able to test E. W. Hornung and de Maupassant against certain experienced realities, had I lived entirely through books, as I might easily have done, had I lived in a pleasing ivory tower, for example by being a university teacher (as my temperament might easily have inclined me to be), I think I should have had a much distorted and reduced, though no doubt much more comfortable, Weltanschauung, an altogether more pleasing view of life and the human condition.

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New poems
by Kay Ryan, W. S. Di Piero & Ben Downing

The well or the cup

How can
you tell
at the start
what you
can give away
and what
you must hold
to your heart.
What is
the well
and what is
a cup. Some
people get
drunk up.

—Kay Ryan

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Thieves

There are thieves
in the mind, their
dens in places
we'd prefer
not to know.
When a word
is lifted from
its spot, we show
no surprise,
replacing *supplies*
with *provender*.
Out here, it's
the tiniest stutter,
the subtlest patch—
an affordable loss
of no significance
whatever to the
plastic surface of
social commerce.
Should a bit vanish
from an event, we
likewise manage.
But back at the ranch,
a hoard is building.
The thieves are
hatching some
fantastic plot
made out of parts
we'd laugh to think
that they thought
matched.

—*Kay Ryan*

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The material

The ratio between the material Cornell collected
and the material that ended up in his boxes
was probably a thousand to one.
—Deborah Solomon, *Joseph Cornell*

Whatever is done
leaves a hole in the
possible, a snip in
the gauze, a marble
and thimble missing
from the immaterial.
The laws are cruel
on this point. The
undone can't be
patched or stretched.
The wounds last.
The bundles of
nothing that are
our gift at birth, the
lavish trains we
trail into our span
like vans of seamless
promise, like fresh
sheets in baskets,
are our stock. We
must extract parts
to do work. As
time passes, the
promise is tattered
like a battle flag
above a war we
hope mattered.

—*Kay Ryan*

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Shipwreck

I was shipwrecked beneath a stormless sky
in a sea shallow enough to stand up in.
—Fernando Pessoa

They're laughable
when we get there—
the ultimate articulations
of despair: trapped
in a tub filling with
our own tears; strapped
to a breadstick mast
a mouse could chew
down; hopping around
the house in paper shackles
wrist and ankle. It's
always stagey. Being
lost is just one's fancy—
some cloth, some paste—
the essence of flimsy.
Therefore we
double don't know
why we don't take off
the Crusoe rags, step
off the island, bow
from the waist, accept
your kudos.

—*Kay Ryan*

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Mowers

Untended two months in my absence,
our backyard's pigweed and razorgrass
stood waist high against my weed-eater's
murderous blade. I bent, off balance,
and scythed tight crescents, mowing with
no plan—that night I'd dream it nicked
my shin and hummed into the air
bone-dust and blood. The dying plants lay
in loose, soft loaves, like sleepers
holding close against night fear or wind.
She who let them grow, preoccupied with us,
house, far dying parents—one remembers
childhood German and "meadowlark"
but not his daughter's name; the ethereal other
recalls what bountiful future waits—
stood a safe distance behind, her voice
wired to the keening edge as gnats
and damselflies fluttered from my cuts.
Wanting worse while she tied off sheaves,
I slanted down to hack and kick up dirt
and stones that scatter-shot my face, wanting
to take something, everything, to its end,
right where our weed garden thrived
with wild fennel and iris. It took two days
and left us weeping and depleted
in our cozy hamlet of shattered steeples,
windfall fences, and stubbled churchyards
where green stuff was already growing back.

—W. S. Di Piero

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Christopher Columbus Park

Checkers, bocce, some days rummy or hearts,
early fall under chestnut trees. Then winter,
inside the rec center, bingo and widows
while snow dazes 8th St.'s traffic lights.
Summer, finally, Mikey and Sal
warm themselves in beach chairs on the grass.
Sticky sunshine, stoagies, Phillies games
quacking from transistors, dago red
dispensed from crystal altar-boy cruets
going up in smoke. Some days,
in pressed t-shirts, Sal played sweet potato,
Mikey the mandolin, bald heads nodding
like tulips. Why wasn't I surprised
by its senselessness, the word we used
to justify what happened, anything
that happens, childhood friends at odds
over money, maybe, or baseball stats,
the unions or Democrats, boiling over
as usual, nose to nose, blue in the face,
until, this one time, Mikey goes home
and comes back with his old kraut Luger,
and Sal starts to run, crabby legs and arms
lacing the air, until he drops, as if life
were one short breath held and spent,
while the pistol rabbits into the air
from slow motion Mikey's hand,
who can't think fast enough to feel
his own heart failing him. Their cronies
couldn't help. What was the fight about?
He never carried the gun. The widows said
bad blood, between old fools too old to know
bad blood was there. One generation kept
the story alive, trying to make it make sense,
but it dried up and blew away, then stuck
here to me, where there's still no saying how
the angers of a place can live in us
like love, thriving, terribly our own.

—*W. S. Di Piero*

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Public transit

Aboard the train, the usual thing:
a conversation overheard,
then eavesdropped on: two friends
discussing an absent third,

their heads ashake with sympathy,
in shared concern their voices hushed;
so that I caught, for all my strain,
no more than snatches as we rushed

downtown. At first one word, " . . . divorce . . . ,"
its steely second syllable
landing like a guillotine,
alone cut through the shrill

disharmony of track and wheel;
but then during a smoother stretch
whole phrases reached my ear:
it seems he'd chanced upon—poor wretch!—

" . . . his wife in bed with someone else . . . "
and that " . . . his daughter has Tourette's. . . . "
And there I was, attending to
the woes of a man I'd never met,

whose very name I failed to learn;
yet all the while half-thinking of
my eight-months-pregnant wife, and how
the vulnerabilities of love

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would soon, for me, be doubled;
and wondering whether I,
when sorrows come (as Claudius says)
no longer single spies

but in ruinous battalions,
can possibly withstand their force;
and whether anyone, in fact,
dare doubt that in due course

they'll be the sad case talked about,
their life careering off the rails:
the one regarding whom such friends
as these, in view of his travails,

will some day ask quite hopelessly
—this last bit gleaned before we all
stand up, get off, disperse—
" . . . Who can catch him if he falls? . . . ."

—Ben Downing

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Theater

Fiddling with *Fiddler*

by Mark Steyn

The question Jerome Robbins used to bug his writers with all the time in rehearsal is the most basic one of all: What is this show about? And the place he wanted it answered was in the opening. On *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1963), audiences were thrown off by the period setting—the togas and the Latin—so he ordered up a curtain-raiser simply announcing that it's meant to be funny—"Comedy Tonight":

> No Royal curse, no Trojan horse
> And a happy ending, of course . . .

And the gags that hadn't worked the night before suddenly worked.

Gypsy (1959) opens at Uncle Jocko's Kiddie Show in Seattle and a chaotic stageful of garishly costumed moppets lumbering through sad routines, until from the back of the auditorium a rasping voice yells, "Sing out, Louise!," and Mama Rose comes barging down the aisle, effectively disrupting the opening of her own show. That's a brilliant way of setting up time, place, and principal character all in a few bars. By contrast, for *West Side Story* (1957), Robbins opens with a wordless orchestral "Prologue," as the Sharks and Jets dance their mutual hostility. It lays out the show's symphonic and choreographic ambitions. If you'd started with song or dialogue and then introduced choreographed gang warfare forty minutes in, it'd seem silly and camp. But putting it up front lets you know this is the language of the drama.

Robbins never answered his nagging rehearsal question better than in his Broadway swansong, *Fiddler on the Roof*. What is this show about?

In a word:

> Tradition!
> Tradition!
> Tradition!

Fiddler is based on a group of stories written by Sholom Aleichem in the 1890s and oughts about Tevye, a dairyman in a Ukrainian shtetl. Aleichem's Tevye is not hung up on tradition. Why would he be? To European Jews a century ago, the scale of their precariousness, on the land they'd lived in for centuries, could not yet be fathomed. So, when Aleichem's Tevye hears that his daughter has pledged herself to the penniless tailor's son, he's not bothered about the tradition of arranged marriages, only that he's been cut out of the deal. As a theme, tradition is the invention of the stage version, concocted by the librettist Joseph Stein, musicalized by the composer Jerry Bock and the lyricist Sheldon Harnick, and brilliantly staged by Robbins to bind this slice of shtetl life into a coherent whole. "Without our traditions," explains Tevye at the end of the opening, "our life would be as shaky as . . ." (and the play's violin theme is recapitulated) ". . . as a fiddler on the roof!"

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That's something else Joseph Stein added—the signature of the play, the Jew as wobbly ridge-line fiddler, an image drawn not from Yiddish folk stories but from Marc Chagall.

The last time I saw *Fiddler* on Broadway was just over a decade ago. As often in productions by Fran and Barry Weissler, the revival had spent so long cleaning up on the road that it staggered into town scuffed and tatty and groggy. But it was good enough. It was *Fiddler* like it always is, and who can louse that up? This time round, *Fiddler* opened at the Minskoff and generated a mountain of controversy. Almost all of it revolves around that one word: "tradition."

"Tradition" has legal implications in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Robbins wasn't a hired dance man, but Broadway's most powerful superstager, whose basic credit by 1964 read "Entire Production Conceived, Choreographed And Directed By . . ." His mentor George Abbott, who thought aggrandized billing was absurd, scoffed, "That's like saying 'Entire Part Of Mother Played By Lizzie Flop.'" But what it means is that, in the legal sense, Robbins's choreography is part of the script. You can't change it. It's not just that you have to have a bottle dance in the wedding scene, you have to have Robbins's bottle dance.

But this revival aims to be what they call a "revisal"—the preferred term for recent productions of *Gypsy*, *Cabaret*, *Carousel*, etc.—and they've done what you always do when you want to "re-examine" a well-loved favorite: hire a British production team, this time headed by the director David Leveaux. The first thing Leveaux did was chuck out the Chagall-inspired Boris Aronson sets in favor of the usual, sparer school of design one sees in London. It's a birch grove—perhaps because England is such a treeless land, its stage designers love any excuse to turn a play into a log drive. I remember a National Theatre production of *A Little Night Music* where the wood moved more than the actors—stylized birches (again) sliding on and off all night. Perhaps, due to Thatcher arts cuts, the theater had been forced into sharing space with a sawmill. But, for whatever reason, you couldn't see the Sondheim for the trees. Tom Pye's set here isn't quite as overpowering, but it still feels generic. It suggests not the great life-affirming spirit of Anatevka, but the Chekhovian isolation of *Three Sisters*, as if Pye's thought processes took the short-cut: Russia—Chekhov—I know, how about bare birch trees? Even with the orchestra on stage and in view, it doesn't fill the barn-like space of the Minskoff and it looks rather too distractingly like a concept as opposed to the place where the story happens.

As to Tevye's eponymous line, there's a fiddler but barely a roof—just a free-floating, weathered piece of the thing flown down for the purposes of balancing a fiddler thereon. It's striking, but that's all: it takes a metaphor rooted in physical reality and turns it into a stage effect. And it symbolizes Pye's great miscalculation: the village is really a character in the play, as much as Catfish Row is in *Porgy and Bess*, and aside from half a gable and a few sticks of furniture we never see Anatevka. It's like watching a production of *Brigadoon* on one of the 36,524 days the town doesn't materialize.

On the other hand, the opening number—the music, the lyrics, the choreography—works as brilliantly as ever. And so we have the paradox of this production: a show about tradition in a revival trying to escape from tradition. And, intentionally or otherwise, by the end of the evening that's become the theme of Leveaux's production. As the villagers abandon Anatevka and leave for America, you appreciate they're in the position Leveaux's been in all night: What do you cling on to? What do you leave behind?

Not everyone agrees with Leveaux's choice, which is why the terrifying *Fiddler on the Roof* death match raged across the New York prints through February and March, climaxing in an unplanned opening-night encounter between Leveaux, and the *Post*'s splendid man about Broadway Michael Riedel, in which the two men came

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to blows. But even we armchair warriors on the aisle found ourselves deeply divided by this production. Broadly speaking there were three positions:

1) This is a great work that's been stripped of its joyful Jewish spirit by the bloodless Englishmen running the show.

2) This is a great work that's been made even greater by the intellectual rigor the bloodless Englishmen have brought to bear upon it.

3) It was never that great anyway, and the Jews are just a lot of cutesified shtetl idiots prancing about going daidle-deeddle-daidle.

On that last line of attack: For the sake of argument, let us grant that it's true—that the pogrom which disrupts village life is the most benign pogrom in history, a musical-comedy pogram; that Anatevka is, as Irving Howe wrote in *Commentary* in 1964, "the cutest shtetl we've never had."

Isn't that, in a way, the point? Do you know how rare it is to find a culture in which Jews are "cute"? I'm not talking about the Tsar's day, or the Nazis'. Right now, every Friday the imams on state TV throughout the Middle East urge good Muslims to "kill all the Jews." The Saudi tourism commission announces a big campaign in the west to promote vacations in the Kingdom and its web site lists among those categories of people ineligible for visas "Jewish persons." Jacques Chirac says there is no anti-Semitism in France, even as the Chief Rabbi advises French Jews not to appear in public with identifying marks of their faith. Forty years after running Irving Howe's blast against the cutest shtetl, the March 2004 *Commentary* carries a long essay by a Parisian correspondent detailing the synagogue and school arsons and physical assaults to which French Jews are increasingly subjected. To complain about the cutesification of one's culture is a luxury European and Middle Eastern Jews would love to be able to afford.

American Jews have enjoyed that rare privilege for a long time. Just as *Fiddler* was the longest-running Broadway hit of its day, so forty years earlier was *Abie's Irish Rose*, a truly terrible play by Anne Nichols about a Jewish boy and a Catholic girl. In the Twenties, it looked like it would run forever. As Rodgers and Hart mocked in "Manhattan,"

> Our future babies
> We'll take to *Abie's*
> *Irish Rose*
> Let's hope they live to see
> It close . . .

In most parts of the world, your hope is that they live to see it open: Imagine a big mass-audience sentimental-comedy Jew-meets-Catholic hit in Riyadh or Damascus. Or Paris or Amsterdam. In America, the Jews universalized their culture.

Fiddler itself marks the close of the American musical's *belle époque*, from 1943 to 1964, *Oklahoma!* to *Fiddler*, when season after season all those Broadway Jews hymned every aspect of the American experience for the lyric stage. It seems fitting that the show that marks the end of Broadway's Golden Age should be almost a piece of collective autobiography, a farewell to the world that the parents of all those Lower East Side composers, lyricists, and librettists left behind.

Stein, Bock, and Harnick are still hale and hearty and worked with Leveaux on this revival. But there are episodes that have that research-material quality you notice when British directors stage the work of the long dead. At the wedding of Tevye's daughter, Tzeitel walks around the groom seven times, as required by Jewish law, rather than three times, which was enough for Robbins in 1964. Leveaux seems proud of the "authenticity" of this scene. I confess I don't understand why, if a couple of shingles and a rafter can symbolize an entire house, three walkarounds can't symbolize seven. Proportionately, the Robbins walkaround gets a lot closer to the real thing than the Leveaux roof. And if the point is to address subtly the complaint that *Fiddler* is in-

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authentic, well, success breeds its own authenticity: within a few years, "Sunrise, Sunset" had become a standard at American bar mitzvahs; invented as a song for *a* Jewish parent, it became one for all.

Maybe that's what Peter Marks was getting at in *The Washington Post*:

> In the secular Jewish home of my childhood, about the closest we ever came to spiritual sustenance was *Fiddler on the Roof*. The hi-fis in other households may have been occupied with the music of the Stones or Joplin or even Creedence Clearwater Revival; ours seemed to be a shrine to the song stylings of Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, grinding out 'Sunrise, Sunset' from dawn till dusk.
>
> We had our rituals: My father could be counted on for a driver's-seat rendition of 'If I Were a Rich Man' at least twice on every road trip. Our iconic images: My piano teacher, Mrs. Skilarsky, kept a portrait of Marc Chagall's fiddler over her piano. Our expressions of worship: My brother, Jamie, played Tevye in a boffo Camp Leonard production.

Marks doesn't spell it out but his complaint is this: no *Fiddler on the Roof* can ever be as good as the *Fiddler* playing in your head. On the night I was there, most folks at the Minskoff were either of an age to have seen the show first-time round or the boomer children thereof, the ones who grew up in a time not, pace Marks, when Creedence Clearwater Revival were hogging the hi-fi, but when the LP market was mostly for parents, and the cast album of *Fiddler* was a staple in most collections, along with cover versions like Steve and Eydie's "Sunrise, Sunset" and "Matchmaker, Matchmaker," respectively. "If I Were a Rich Man" may well be the all-time great family road-trip song, with all the singalong biddy-biddy-bums for the kids and a lyric theme of particular appeal to dad:

> Lord, who made the lion and the lamb
> You decreed I should be what I am
> Would it spoil some vast eternal plan
> If I were a wealthy man?

On stage, the song goes to Alfred Molina, the Spanish-Italian Englishman who makes a nice living as an all-purpose exotic in American films and plays. He's a reliable actor—very good in *Art* a couple of seasons back—and he's not undisciplined, unlike the original Tevye, Zero Mostel. I once talked to Joe Stein, who recalled a show where Mostel had been adlibbing and throwing in his own Yiddishisms. Afterwards, Stein complained and Mostel told him, "Listen, when I'm on stage it's between me and the audience. Everybody else has gotta get outta the way."

Stein said, "Including the play?" It's difficult to imagine Molina being as wayward as Mostel was late in the run. On the other hand, it's difficult to imagine Molina and this show still being on late in the run. And, whatever's going on, it's not between him and the audience. Casting tony English actors in the star role is a signature of this school of "re-examination." The director patiently explains that, much as he personally loves Ethel Merman or Robert Preston or Gwen Verdon, a star only gets in the way of the character: the audience sees the marquee name, not the guy he's meant to be playing. That's true, up to a point. But Molina is a textbook example of the problems a serious actor brings. He's thought the role through: Who is Tevye? What's driving him? Does he really want to be a rich man? And, if so, why can he say nothing about its attractions other than daidle-deedle-daidle-deedle-dum? Does his inability to articulate it perhaps express, in a sense, his ambivalence about being a rich man?

In a straight play, this approach can be helpful. But, when you come to a song in a musical, the audience wants you to surrender to it, to lose yourself in the material. A Zero Mostel can do that: the song and the singer merge, and they solve that old problem—that the star obstructs the character. In a musical, it's in the synthesis of star and number that the character emerges—Ensign Nellie Forbush is Mary Martin washing that man right out of her

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hair. But, when it comes to "If I Were a Rich Man," Molina's Tevye is tentative and wary, and the dance steps are plonkingly earthbound. He's playing the milkman's humility and poverty. But, in a musical, when the humble little guy sings a song, it's supposed to be a big joyous release:

> I'm as corny as Kansas in August!
> High as a flag on the Fourth of July!

In approaching "If I Were a Rich Man" as a recently unearthed alternative Hamlet soliloquy, the actor denies the form, and cheats the audience. I overheard someone at intermission praising Molina's "actorly intelligence." But, if you're aware of the actorliness, it isn't that intelligent. Tevye has to be vital, life-affirming—because in Anatevka there's not a lot else around that's going to affirm it. Molina is a big-hearted actor, and there's a moment in the film *Chocolat*, in which he plays a local French count, when a little girl asks him if he's like the Count of Monte Cristo and he gives a smile of pure delight. But, though physically much lighter than Mostel and Topol (in the film), he seems weighed down here, as if some profound truth struck him in rehearsal and he can't crawl out from under the burden. This, in a nutshell, is why it's not as good as it was in your dad's car.

It's also why some of Mostel's and Topol's surest-fire yuks expire at the footlights: Molina seems to feel it's nobler to eschew laughs. And, while one can certainly make a case for underplaying the shtetl shtick that encrusted this show during decades of Hadassah theater, what's also been lost is the musical's sense of direct connection between shtetl Jews and God. Tevye's famous ongoing dialogue with the Big Guy—the on-the-one-hand/on-the-other bits—is sadly unconvincing in its rendering here. "If I Were a Rich Man" is funny not just because it's ruefully ironic (as Molina plays it) but because, as much as "Ol' Man River," it expresses the cruel vicissitudes of fate as applied to an entire people. The giveaway line is when Tevye sings:

> And I'd discuss the holy books with the
> learned men seven hours every day
> That would be the sweetest thing of all . . .

It ought to be a moment of self-knowledge—that's why it comes late in the song—but Molina plays it as just another rich man's whimsy, like the staircase going nowhere.

Molina symbolizes the lack of burly ebullience in the show and its weird paralyzing self-doubt. If it's meant to be kitchen-sink naturalism, it leaves a big hole in the show. But, as the evening goes on, it seems something more—like a loss of faith in the material. Joe Stein's big laugh line for Tevye to God—"I know we're the chosen people, but once in a while could you choose someone else?"—rings hollow from Molina, as if he doesn't really accept the premise that underpins the joke.

Something's missing. The audience feels it. It's not that the bloodless Englishmen lack Jewish spirit, but that that particular spirit—at least as expressed in *Fiddler*—is a product of a particular time. A text, a score, a work of art stays the same but the world around it changes. When Joe Stein sat down to adapt Sholom Aleichem's stories in the early Sixties, he knew something the original author didn't—that the world Aleichem was writing about had gone forever. For Aleichem's generation, anti-Semitism was serious but not necessarily fatal. Stein's generation understood the stage that comes after the pogroms, and that's built into the play. When you're in love the whole world's Jewish, and in 1964 it was, more or less. It was two decades from the Holocaust, the plucky Jewish state was new and making a go of it, "Palestinian nationalism" was not yet a cause and its terrorist leader was only just forming his organization. After the 1967 war, the dynamic changed: the Jews were no longer the underdogs, they had the tanks and planes, the terrorist was dignified by the world as a head of state in search of a state to head, his people became the cause du jour, and

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Europe tiptoed slowly but surely back down the path to its oldest hatred—today, French synagogues are burned and German Holocaust memorials are defaced and Belgian soccer fans taunt the visiting Israeli team with oven jokes. As Stein did with Aleichem, Leveaux knows what comes after.

Even after its success on Broadway, the creators of *Fiddler* were told that it was "too Jewish" for London, for Europe, for anywhere except New York and its built-in Jewish theater crowd. The naysayers were wrong. During the Tokyo run, a fan came up to Joe Stein and marveled that the show could ever have worked in America because "it is so Japanese." Yes, it is. The balance between tradition and change is a Japanese theme, and an Irish theme, and a Belizean theme. But, in the end, it's about singing Jews. And I very much doubt that *Fiddler* would be a big hit right now in France or Germany or Belgium.

Perhaps this is what Leveaux, Molina, and Co. mean by their subdued, enervated production—that its buoyancy was a product of the time, but the subtext is what's relevant now. Memorable moments can't in themselves make a production but Leveaux finds several that linger. One of his notions is to play up the role of the fiddler, the embodiment of the Jews' precarious situation. Anatevka is abandoned, the villagers leave for points west, and the fiddler passes his fiddle to a child on the road. And so the final image of the evening is a silhouette of unanswered questions: What became of the fiddler? And the boy? In 1964, we could bet on a happy ending, of course. Now, once again, it's not so sure.

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Art

An island paradise in Boston

by Karen Wilkin

Poor Paul Gauguin. Not only do most undergraduates persist in spelling his name without the second "u," but he is also a victim of what a colleague calls the "Van Gogh's Ear Syndrome"—or, in this case, the "Polynesian Babe Syndrome." Thanks to popular novels and movies, we know that Gauguin looked like Anthony Quinn, behaved badly a lot of the time, and called himself "a savage." We know that he was Van Gogh's roommate in Arles, that they fought bitterly (see "Ear Syndrome") and that afterwards, Gauguin went off to the South Seas to live by plucking fruit from the trees, surrounded by golden-skinned maidens who served as models and lovers, painting faithful images of an exotic Eden. Or something like that. In fact, some of this pop version of the story is not wholly inaccurate. Self-portraits and photographs suggest that Anthony Quinn was an inspired casting choice. The part about Gauguin's referring to himself as "a savage" and "primitive" can certainly be documented, as can his quarrels with Van Gogh—and a lot of other people. And that he spent the last years of his life living and working in Polynesia is a matter of historical fact.

Yet if the irritable, aquiline-nosed Gauguin and his images of firm-fleshed *vahines* have entered the popular consciousness, just what he was up to in the South Pacific can sometimes seem a little problematic. No one can deny Gauguin's importance to the development of modernism, but those lush images of solid, bare-breasted females in tropical settings can appear at once overly familiar and little explored. This may soon change. "Gauguin Tahiti," a fascinating exhibition seen this winter in Paris and now on view at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, should at last replace pre-packaged, simplistic ideas about this unresolved painter with more accurate information and, at the same time, fine-tune the perceptions of even the most sophisticated viewers.[1] "Gauguin Tahiti" counters myths and assumptions with unignorable visual evidence and exhaustive research. The show tracks Gauguin's evolution, dissects his methods, and explores his intentions. It examines his history and the context in which he worked, illuminates his sources, and points to his influence on subsequent generations of artists. Most of all, by marshaling a superior selection of works, the exhibition makes us reconsider what we thought we knew about Gauguin to make us freshly aware of his originality and single-mindedness.

"Gauguin Tahiti" proves that the truth about this driven painter's South Pacific "idyll" was much more interesting and ab-

1 "Gauguin Tahiti" opened at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston on February 29 and remains on view through June 20, 2004. The exhibition was previously on view at the Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris from October 3, 2003 to January 29, 2004. A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by MFA Publications (372 pages, $65).

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sorbing than the romanticized tale. The facts of Gauguin's entire biography are so extravagant that they require no spin. Born in Paris in 1848, he spent much of his early childhood in Peru, where his mother had family connections, after the sudden death of his father. (Later, he explained his thirst for the "primitive" and the exotic by boasting that he had "Inca blood.") As a very young man, Gauguin was a merchant seaman, sailing around the world to the coast of Chile, crossing the Arctic Circle, and cruising the Mediterranean. Yet at twenty-four, the "savage" turned into a *bon bourgeois*, settling in Paris as a stockbroker. Over the next decade or so, he married a Danish woman, fathered five children, and —here it starts to get really improbable— started to exhibit as an amateur painter and sculptor. He got to know the Impressionists, began to collect their work, and participated in several of the Impressionist exhibitions. By 1883, he was describing himself, officially, as "artist-painter." The "savage" once again supplanted the *bon bourgeois*. After that, it's the stuff of docudrama. Gauguin's wife and family retreated to Denmark, while he lived hand-to-mouth in France, as part of a small, embattled circle of vanguard artists, rapidly working his way through Impressionist ideas to a personal brand of Symbolism. He spent extended periods in the artists' haven of Pont-Aven, in Brittany, attracted both by the possibility of living cheaply and by the pious Breton peasants' austere, arduous existence in their Northern, coastal terrain, which struck him as "primitive" and "savage."

It is at the end of this stage of Gauguin's life that "Gauguin Tahiti" begins, with a small group of Breton works, made between 1889 and 1891, that announce the presence of an individual voice and a distinctive vision. The rhythmic strokes and chiseled forms of Gauguin's paintings of these years declare his admiration for Cézanne, but his astonishing sense of color is indebted to no one. Already Gauguin's landscapes are saturated with superheated pinks and golden yellows; the fields and trees of Northern France become expanses of malachite and deep viridian. It's not simply that observation has been transformed by memory or that hues have been exaggerated to emphasize drama, according to Symbolist principles; the role of color has been completely reinvented. Gauguin's subject matter is already supercharged in similar ways, already overtly strange, especially in a pair of carved wooden reliefs whose unstable spaces and gesticulating nudes invite comparison with Edvard Munch. The author of these works is introduced by the modestly sized but arresting *Self-Portrait with Yellow Christ* (1890–1891, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). Gauguin presents himself as a wary tough-guy in a workman's sweater. He is almost squeezed out of the shallow space of the canvas by two of his own works of the period, *The Yellow Christ*, now in the collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, and an oversized ceramic pot/grotesque head. The painting's combination of ferocity, formal tension, and seductive palette is a harbinger of what is to come.

The focal point of "Gauguin Tahiti" is the monumental allegory in the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?*, with its enigmatic cast of characters, young and old, clothed and nude, male and female. It's an unforgettable, seemingly unfathomable picture, luminous as a stained glass window despite its declaratively matte surface, all sturdy bodies and bronze skin glowing against mysterious blue depths of strange vegetation. Painted in Tahiti in 1897, towards the end of Gauguin's life—he died in 1903, a month short of his fifty-fifth birthday—the large horizontal canvas was intended by the painter both as a meditation on the course of human life and a summing-up of his most passionately held aesthetic beliefs, inflected by a highly personal interpretation of Polynesian mythology and culture—in short, a pictorial last will and testament. (Gauguin made a serious but unsuccessful suicide attempt soon after completing the painting.)

The exhibition examines what its curator,

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George T. M. Shackelford, calls "the ancestors and the progeny" of Gauguin's elusive masterwork. The ancestors include the works he made in Brittany in the late 1880s, as foreshadowings, as well as more direct precursors, such as those made during the painter's initial sojourn in Tahiti from 1891 and 1893, and during his return to France from 1893 to 1895. The progeny are the works in various media Gauguin derived from *D'où venons-nous?* during his final years in Tahiti and the Marquesa Islands. As we move through the exhibition, which concentrates on figure paintings, with a few landscapes, we become increasingly aware of recurring themes, poses, and motifs that allow us to begin to "deconstruct" or at least, partially unravel, aesthetically and conceptually, Boston's eerie picture. This ambitious undertaking is fully realized in Shackelford's excellent, copiously illustrated essay devoted to *D'où venons-nous?* in the exhibition catalogue, a probing discussion that not only illuminates Gauguin's complex sources, but also traces the echoes of the Boston painting in his subsequent work. The meaning of *D'où venons-nous?* remains, happily, open to infinite interpretation, Gauguin's careful identification of each figure for a presumably uncomprehending Parisian public notwithstanding. Most dramatically, the exhibition reconstructs the initial exhibition of *D'où venons-nous?*, reuniting it with eight of the nine paintings, all related by size and subject matter, with which it was first shown, in 1898, in Paris; this intricately linked group of pictures has not been seen together since then.

The works in "Gauguin Tahiti" include not only key paintings, but also drawings, ceramics, wood carvings, woodblock prints, domestic objects embellished by Gauguin, and poignantly, the reliefs he carved to surround the door of his last home, the perhaps ironically named "House of Pleasure," on the remote island of Hiva Oa, in the Marquesas, where he spent his last, painful years. The complex sources that inform all these disparate, but intimately connected works are suggested by a counterpoint of extraordinary tribal objects from Oceania, all of which can be proven or reasonably assumed to have been seen by Gauguin. Philippe Peltier's enlightening contribution to the exhibition catalogue, "Gauguin: Artist and Ethnographer," examines the reverberations in the painter's work of such objects and discusses, too, the manifestations of his discovery of traditional Polynesian practices and animistic beliefs, which transformed everyday occurrences and almost every aspect of nature into a portent or an embodiment of hidden power. (Gauguin's knowledge of Polynesian religion was mainly derived not, as he later wrote, from his *vahines*, but from a not-very-up-to-date ethnographic book.) The connections between these sources and Gauguin's art can be startling. No fences ever existed in Tahiti even faintly resembling the elaborately carved example stretching across the foreground of an economical landscape from the painter's first stay on the island; Gauguin extrapolated and enlarged a typical motif from a tiny ear ornament from the Marquesas, probably sketched on a visit to a museum.

The show includes a wealth of such material, including vintage photographs of everything from South Sea islanders to exotic (and sometimes not so exotic) works of art, several of which were part of the "portable museum" that Gauguin took with him to Tahiti. A handful of letters and notes, some with illustrations, bring Gauguin vividly to life; it comes as something of a surprise to realize that the self-proclaimed "barbarian" had handwriting as precise, elegant, and legible as a schoolmaster—or a stockbroker. One of the most moving inclusions is the manuscript of Gauguin's fanciful, poetic account of his life in Tahiti, *Noa Noa*—"fragrance"—with its collage-like accumulations of pasted-in watercolors, photographs, and fragments of prints, intertwined with handwritten text. (The catalogue includes a fascinating essay, by Isabelle Cahn, about Gauguin's book, examining both its evolution and its relation—and lack of relation—to the reality of his experience.)

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It rapidly becomes clear that his trip to Tahiti was a result, not a cause. The heightened sensuality and saturated palette of the Breton works in the exhibition's introduction are the first hint that Gauguin carried a vision of a South Pacific paradise within him, intensified by a stay in Panama and Martinique in 1887 in connection with the construction of the Panama Canal. Gauguin hoped to return permanently to Martinique, to live in "primitive" conditions, as a "savage," but the farthest south he could afford to get was Arles, with Van Gogh, with, as we know, disastrous results. Gauguin's desire to establish himself in Lotosland was partly stimulated by his earlier experience of the tropics, but it was also fuelled by literature, and probably inflamed by the *Exposition Universelle* of 1889 in Paris, which celebrated colonial France. The displays included "villages" devoted to the architecture and crafts of the native peoples of Africa and the South Pacific, populated by the people themselves, exhibited in "traditional" costumes, performing "traditional" dances, and making traditional artifacts. Three years after the *Exposition*, in 1891, Gauguin at last found a way of realizing his dream of a primitive life in a tropical Arcadia; he managed to persuade the Commission of Public Education and Fine Arts to sponsor him on an official artistic mission to study and paint the culture of Tahiti. In June 1891, the painter arrived in Papeete.

Gauguin went to the South Pacific expecting to find an unspoiled golden age. But instead of an exotic island culture, he encountered a fully developed colonial society. Waves of missionaries had long since destroyed most of the indigenous religious practices. The islanders were swathed in long dresses. The cost of living was surprisingly high—no living by plucking fruit from the trees. What then are we to make of Gauguin's Tahitian images, of the Polynesian myths recorded in *Noa Noa*, which he claimed to have learned from his islander friends and mistresses, of the mysterious "idols" that punctuate the backgrounds of many of his pictures? The exhibition makes it clear that Gauguin's visions of a South Seas Eden were inventions, efforts to recapture an ideal, infinitely desirable, vanished way life that may, in fact, have never really existed or, if it did, was never as Arcadian as the literature—or the exhibits at the 1889 Paris *Exposition Universelle*—suggested.

Gauguin's paintings are a passionate envisioning of what he wished was there, his carvings and ceramics the artifacts of his fictional culture, inspired by actuality, imagined as the vestiges of a lost Eden. But while it is undoubtedly true that the brilliant light of the islands, the unexpected shapes and intense colors of tropical vegetation, and the sculptural bodies of the Polynesians themselves gave Gauguin license for formal invention, the exhibition in Boston makes it clear that many other sources played their part in his creation of his vision of the South Pacific as it should have been. "Gauguin Tahiti" includes photographs of carvings on the Javanese Buddhist temple of Borobudur, of Egyptian wall reliefs, and of sculpture from the Parthenon, most of which can be documented as having belonged to Gauguin. Oceanic art from many places other than Tahiti, as well as Japanese prints, Rembrandt's etchings, the frescoes of the inescapable Puvis de Chavannes, among other things, all helped to furnish Gauguin's imagination. Gradually, we begin to recognize his interpretations of this eclectic mix—signals, it seems of the exotic, the "primitive," and the "savage"—that serve as building blocks for the construction of a fictional island Nirvana. The standing "idol" that becomes an emblem of indigenous Tahitian religion and appears in the background of *D'où venons-nous?*, for example, has its origins in Java. The parallel seated poses of a row of Tahitian women in long-sleeved gowns recapitulate Egyptian models. Gauguin even entered into a visual dialogue with his own near-contemporaries. *Manao tupapau (The Spirit of the Dead Watching)* (1892, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo), the celebrated image of a nude young woman, face down in a setting of twilight

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purples and deep blues spattered with exploding white flowers, is an homage and challenge to (among other sources) Manet's notorious *Olympia*, painted almost three decades earlier. *Manao tupapau*, which Gauguin called his "Olympia *noire*," is a metaphorical and literal reversal of Manet's composition. Instead of a reclining nude who stares boldly at the viewer, her pale skin luminous against white sheets, Gauguin presents us with an apparently introspective figure, seen from the rear, her copper-colored flesh brilliant against a pale expanse; Manet's outward-facing servant, with her lush bouquet, is replaced by a baleful background figure in profile, half-sculpture, half-crone. The ominous mood, the peculiar blend of voluptuousness and terror, are Gauguin's own.

On one level, "Gauguin Tahiti" can be approached as a purely art historical exercise, the varied works on view interrogated and enjoyed for what they reveal about Gauguin's aims and methods. We can follow him as he gives the pose of a Javanese Buddha to a Polynesian Eve, for example, or watch him dissect the enormous panorama of *D'où venons-nous?* into the smaller canvases that he intended to be exhibited with the large painting, as though at once expanding upon the implied meanings of his arcane allegory of birth, youth, maturity, and age, and exploring the formal implications of his figure groups. We can ponder the probable symbolic meanings of Gauguin's fantastic trees, flowers, and animals or speculate on the connections between particular artifacts and the painter's improvisations. We can note the complex interrelationship of his aggressive carvings and highly charged ceramics to the more restrained, almost classically ordered paintings.

And more. It's thought-provoking to notice that even though Gauguin initially went to Tahiti to record the appearance and mores of life on the island—according to the terms of his government-sponsored "mission"—the paintings from his first sojourn seem far more stylized and conceptualized than those painted after he returned permanently to the South Pacific. Many of the paintings from Gauguin's second sojourn, for all their singing color and declarative surfaces, appear to be more evidently based on perception, albeit perception filtered through an arsenal of conceptualized images, and put into the service of a private vision. They include some of his most evocative, mature compositions. It can be argued, in fact, that when Gauguin relies mainly on memory, assembling his figures from his mental image bank of poses and groupings (as he once maintained was imperative, to eliminate the inessential details of actuality), his compositions can become pictorially incoherent or overly busy—which may be why the late paintings with large-scale figures crowding out anecdotal background events are often among his best.

As installed in Boston, "Gauguin Tahiti" includes a good many works in this category, including the Metropolitan's well-known *Two Tahitian Women* (1899), a solemn, frontal pair, one holding a bowl of crimson fruit, exhibited in close proximity to the National Gallery of Scotland's marvelous *Three Tahitians*, painted the same year, a tightly cropped frieze of two women flanking a man, like an exotic variation on the classical type of the three graces, with its counterpoint of back and front. Simply because both paintings deal with massive, broadly painted, rough-brushed, half-length figures stripped to the waist, against schematic fragments of landscape, it is informative to see them together, whatever their connection to the iconography and characters of *D'où venons-nous?* But longer acquaintance alerts us to the similarity between the right-hand figures in both pictures, each clasping a handful of flowers, making us think once again about Gauguin's ability to invent and about the artifice of both his painted worlds and of painting itself.

Equally about artifice is the stunning *Still Life with Sunflowers on an Armchair (II)* (1901, Hermitage, St. Petersburg), with its weird conflation of the naturalistic and the irrational. The flowers spring, improbably,

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from a low basket placed on a chair festooned with a white cloth; the head of a Tahitian youth is glimpsed through a window, while a "ghost flower," like a giant eye, hovers. Space collapses as Gauguin's brilliant two-dimensional orchestration of dull golds, deep blue, and black supersedes ordinary spatial logic. The most brilliantly lit, crisply defined part of the painting, the head of the Tahitian, presses forward, trapped by the geometric window frame, while the golden flowers writhe in non-space against expanses of darkness.

It's paintings like these that remind us how much Matisse learned from Gauguin. It is obvious that Gauguin's luscious, all-stops-out palette served as an important precedent for Matisse and his fellow Fauve painters' use of intense, unmodulated hues placed side by side. For a subtler connection between Gauguin and Matisse, we have to return to *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* That Matisse knew and was interested in the picture is documented. (He is supposed to have urged one of his Russian patrons to buy the painting when it came up for resale.) That he admired *D'où venons-nous?* is hinted at by his two great canvases, the Art Institute of Chicago's *Bathers by a River* (1909–1910, 1913, 1916), with its row of vertical figures and schematic foliage, and the Saint Louis Art Museum's *Bathers with a Turtle* (1908), with its trio of seated, crouching, and standing figures against a landscape reduced to expanses of saturated blue and green. It's not only that the poses of some of Matisse's figures echo Gauguin's, but also that the ambition, the scale, and the otherworldly mood of the two Arcadian masterpieces resonate with *D'où venons-nous?*—which is not to ignore the echoes of Cézanne's late bathers.

Interesting as the question of Gauguin's influence is, it is one of the few provocative issues connected with the artist not directly addressed in the catalogue accompanying "Gauguin Tahiti." Just about everything else seems to have been anticipated and intelligently considered, from discussions of specific works of art in all media, to sources, to Gauguin as a writer, to the development of his reputation after his death, among other topics. The reproductions, which include a lavish centerfold of *D'où venons-nous?*, are better than usual. Just don't try to find specific images by looking up the titles in the amazingly unhelpful index of the artist's works. But that's a quibble. As installed in Boston, the exhibition is a mind-stretching delight. I'm going to have to rethink Gauguin's position in my private pantheon.

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Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

The Cleveland Orchestra came to Carnegie Hall for two concerts, one quite different from the other. The orchestra did not have its music director, Franz Welser-Möst, but a guest conductor long associated with it: Pierre Boulez. The French maestro and composer first led the Cleveland Orchestra in 1965. He is also an honorary trustee of Carnegie Hall, and, on the day of the first concert, he spoke during the hall's annual press luncheon. That luncheon had the aspect of a memorial service, as Carnegie's much admired executive and artistic director, Robert Harth, had just died.

At that first concert, Boulez conducted three French works plus *The Miraculous Mandarin* of Bartók. He opened with a piece by Marc-André Dalbavie, born in 1961. This was *Concertate il suono*, a work that experiments with "spatial relations." Clusters of musicians are spread around the hall as the body of the orchestra sits onstage. The fabled acoustics of Carnegie Hall were particularly remarkable during this piece.

The concert continued with Messiaen's *Oiseaux exotiques*, in which Boulez and the Clevelanders were joined by the evening's guest soloist, the pianist Michiko Uchida. (Boulez, incidentally, studied under Messiaen, and has always happily championed him.) After intermission, Uchida returned to play Ravel's G-major concerto, and she played it with surprising insensitivity: It was rushed, slurred, heavy, often pounded, out of balance. And that storied orchestra behind her was none too effective either. The orchestra righted itself in *The Miraculous Mandarin*, however, showing the full effect of its virtuosity.

The next night's concert was a most unusual one: It began with the Adagio from Mahler's Symphony No. 10 and continued with Act II of Wagner's great, long, immortal opera *Parsifal*.

You have, surely, heard better accounts of that Mahler Adagio. The orchestra was sloppy, technically, which is not how the Cleveland Orchestra behaves. Entrances were clumsy, particularly in the brass. Horn playing was terribly pinched. This pinched quality, however, was in contrast with some beautifully warm strings. Boulez conducted this piece carefully, by which I mean no compliment: The notes were "placed," and the Adagio did not develop naturally, inevitably. It neither gripped nor transported. That is not Mahler. And yet, Boulez is one of the most understanding and successful Mahler conductors in the world. He just nodded, slightly.

Boulez is also renowned as a Wagnerian. Now, it happens that the Philadelphia Orchestra (under Christoph Eschenbach) is scheduled to perform Act III from *Parsifal* at Carnegie Hall next season. A wag remarked, before the Boulez/Cleveland concert, "So you can wait here until January '05 if you want to go right into Act III." And who will provide Act I?

The three principal singers under Boulez

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were Michelle DeYoung, mezzo-soprano (Kundry), Thomas Moser, tenor (Parsifal), and Eike Wilm Schulte, baritone (Klingsor). In my experience, DeYoung has been a most uneven singer. I remember, for example, a recital in Weill Recital Hall: One wondered how she got such a big career. But I also remember a turn in the Mahler Third with the San Francisco Symphony and Michael Tilson Thomas. She handled that noble part superbly. Of course, singers are allowed to be inconsistent, more than violinists, pianists, oboists—such is the nature of the instrument.

Thomas Moser is a member of the Vienna State Opera, but he is also a presence in New York. For instance, he sang the Emperor in the Metropolitan Opera's wonderful production of Strauss's *Frau ohne Schatten*. (That production is by the late Herbert Wernicke.) Moser is a heldentenor, I suppose, but he is not a barker, as there is plenty of lyricism and beauty in that voice.

And about Eike Wilm Schulte, I offer a very clear and pleasing memory: He was Beckmesser in a Met *Meistersinger* (Wagner). The cast boasted many excellent and celebrated singers, including James Morris and René Pape, those low-voice stars. Schulte—relatively unknown—held his own, and better than that. So his Klingsor promised to be first-rate.

It was. Schulte sang with solid authority, comprehending the music before him, and the interesting role of Klingsor. He has a splendid instrument, and he is particularly apt at articulation: The dramatics of the text were a delight in his mouth.

Michelle DeYoung was in fine form, making rich and sometimes radiant sounds. The voice turned hard—very hard—up top (this music rises to B), but such notes may be judged beyond the call of the mezzo's duty. Thomas Moser was in similarly fine form, showing off a rather baritonal tenor. Operagoers in New York have been used to hearing two people in the roles of Parsifal and Kundry: Plácido Domingo, the ageless Spaniard, and Violeta Urmana, the Lithuanian mezzo (or former mezzo, I should say, as she has apparently switched to soprano). Those two are hard to beat in those parts; and Moser and DeYoung did not beat them; but they acquitted themselves with distinction.

Pierre Boulez loves Wagner, and he treated this score lovingly. The flow and transport that were absent from the Mahler, in my view, were present here, in *Parsifal*. You could have objected that this was Classical Wagner, not Wagnerian enough—not expansive, dreamy, and wild enough. But a Wagner score contains enough of that all by itself. Boulez's restraint, smoothness, and sense of proportion made for a service.

Six days after the Cleveland Orchestra left Carnegie, the Vienna Philharmonic arrived, for three concerts. It had on the podium Seiji Ozawa, late of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He led the BSO for twenty-nine years, and most people agreed that it was time to end the affair. Ozawa landed very well: He is music director of the Vienna State Opera, and frequently leads the Philharmonic in concert.

I think of a story that Bill Buckley likes to tell. Cardinal Segura, in Seville, was a severe type, who frowned on dancing and other forms of gaiety. After he died, a visitor asked a local, "How's it going, now that the cardinal is gone?" Came the reply: "When Cardinal Segura left us, both he and we passed on to a better world." Well, in my judgment, both Ozawa and the Boston Symphony have passed on to a better world.

Ozawa led programs that you might expect from a Viennese institution, namely Richard Strauss, Mahler, and Schoenberg (the first night); Schubert and Bruckner (the second night); and Webern, Stravinsky, and Beethoven (the third). (Granted, Stravinsky was a bit of a curveball.) That second concert consisted of a very well known symphony, and a very little known symphony by a famous and beloved symphonist.

The first work was Schubert's No. 8, nicknamed, of course, the "Unfinished."

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The Viennese, under Ozawa, did not exactly give a deathless performance of it. They botched the start, and all other entrances throughout the first movement were chancy. Ozawa's gestures can be frustratingly imprecise. But he has his virtues, including a gift for texture. He textured this first movement interestingly: It had a delicacy, almost a chamber-music quality. As for the second (and last) movement, it had a proper folk feeling. Both conductor and orchestra were respectable. But this was far from an absorbing account. There was nothing special about it, and nothing wretched. It was sort of indifferent—not what Schubert deserves, perhaps especially from his hometown orchestra.

The Bruckner Second, fortunately, was another story. This is the Bruckner symphony heard least often, and many argue that it is the least of them, period. It is certainly not a symphony on which Bruckner would have wanted to stake his reputation; but it is a Bruckner symphony nonetheless, and bears the stamp of his genius.

Under Ozawa, it was beautifully and grippingly begun—and so it would continue. Whereas the Schubert had been sleepy, the Bruckner was alive. Extraordinarily alive. It provided a clue as to how Seiji won his fans in the first place. All the usual Bruckner elements were manifest, plus some elements that may be thought of as un-Brucknerian: humor, impishness, some ribaldry. In the main, Ozawa's Second was robust and masculine, while always putting forward a beauty. The symphony can become episodic, but Ozawa did not let it. In the second movement (Andante), the playing was magnificently warm. In the third (Mäßig schnell), all involved breathed fire—a holy fire. And in the Finale, we heard Bruckner's defiant, persevering spirit: and his questing hunger, and his submitting soul. The entire experience was thrilling.

A veteran in the music world, standing as she applauded, said, "I haven't heard Seiji conduct like this since 1963." That may be a bit of an exaggeration, but the lady had a point. So, does Boston want him back?

A third orchestra traveled to Carnegie Hall in this period: the Royal Concertgebouw, under Herbert Blomstedt, the American-Swedish conductor. Since 1998, he has been music director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra; he was guesting with the gang from Amsterdam. Though he has not had a superstar's career, Blomstedt is a solid and capable conductor, prized by soloists as an especially skilled collaborator. As for the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, it is about to lose Riccardo Chailly, its music director for the past fifteen years. Arriving next fall is Mariss Jansons, who is leaving the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. I am certain of one thing: The Concertgebouw is gaining a better world.

In two concerts at Carnegie Hall, the orchestra played four very, very familiar symphonies: the Fourth of Beethoven and the Fourth of Tchaikovsky; and the No. 41 of Mozart ("Jupiter") and the First of Brahms. If you are going to play music so familiar and canonical—especially in this hall—you had better have a reason. It had better be good.

The "Jupiter" Symphony was not. (I heard only the second concert.) It seemed that Blomstedt could not decide whether he wanted to give a "period"-style performance—an original-instruments-like performance—or a fully modern one. He had no podium and no baton. Much of the playing was tidy, graceful, and clear. But it was also bloodless and overly decorous. It had no vibrancy; indeed, it was outright dull. The orchestra's sound, most of the time, was muted. I say, let Poland be Poland, let Reagan be Reagan—and let the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra be the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. If you have a big, glorious modern orchestra, use it! Leave the period stuff to the Concentus Musicus Wien or something. Besides which, this is a late, great Mozart symphony—the very last one. There is no need to step daintily around it.

The second and third movements were both pretty and polite—which are not flattering terms, in this case—and the final

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movement had almost none of its intensity and joy. What a waste.

The concert was redeemed by the second piece on the program, however: the Brahms First. Here Blomstedt earned his bread. He retained his "Jupiter" clarity, which was laudable: This symphony can be draped too heavily, can be larded up; Blomstedt kept it free. In the first movement, he was smart, incisive, and fairly Classical. This was as sharply etched a reading as you are ever likely to hear. And the second movement was a good example of how to play richly without creating mush. The third movement was for the most part relaxed—as it tends to be—but it also had a nice edge on occasion. The Finale was magisterial, with generous, glowing brass chorales, and an exciting lead-in to the closing C-major hymn, which itself was grand but not fulsome. This entire movement was tight and impassioned, an excellent combination for Brahms.

Again, if you are going to play a work like this—in Carnegie Hall—you had better play it surpassingly. In the Brahms, Blomstedt and the Royal Concertgebouw delivered. In the Mozart . . . why, you might have stayed home with your Bruno Walter recording.

A day after this concert, Ivan Moravec was scheduled to play a recital—in this same Carnegie Hall. He is the great Czech pianist, born in 1930. But he was ill and had to cancel. His replacement was one of the best pianists of the younger generation, the Frenchman Jean-Yves Thibaudet (born 1961). As I have insisted before, ours is not a golden age for pianists, but Moravec is one—a golden pianist—and Thibaudet is another. And so, as it happens, is the Russian Mikhail Pletnev, who played a recital of his own at Carnegie not long after Thibaudet's.

The Frenchman selected a program that played to his many strengths: Chopin, Liszt, Satie, and Debussy. He began with two Nocturnes of Chopin, that in B-flat minor, Op. 9, No. 1, and that in E-flat major, Op. 9, No. 2. In the first, he was clear-toned and ruminative. The melody in the right hand was properly accompanied by the left—not every pianist manages this. And the entire piece was beautifully phrased and breathed. He is a terribly musical guy, Thibaudet (in whatever he is playing). He brought out Chopin's modulations, but did not do so obtrusively—all was natural and lyrical.

It was rather daring of Thibaudet to play that Nocturne in E flat: This is one of the most hackneyed works in Chopin, and therefore one of the most hackneyed works in the piano literature. But he gave it great dignity, "singing" nicely, taking a sensible tempo, exhibiting no condescension whatsoever. The ending—limpid, quietly rocking—was a delight. This is really a good piece, ladies and gentlemen: which is how it became hackneyed.

Next came two of Chopin's Etudes, that in A-flat major, Op. 25, No. 1, and that in F major, Op. 25, No. 3. Thibaudet has more than a little technique. The sheer relaxation of the arms is astounding, allowing for any number of possibilities. In the A-flat Etude, he made the piano sound like a harp. In the F-major Etude, he was a musical peasant, dancing and stomping and exulting.

Following the Etudes were two "Grand, Brilliant" Waltzes, in A minor (Op. 34, No. 2) and E-flat major (Op. 18). These pieces can be somewhat repetitious, but Thibaudet took care to supply some variation, which is what Chopin almost surely intended (and did himself, as a performer). Thibaudet gives off a feeling of improvisation, which makes him somewhat hard to record: He follows his mood—along with that of the composer—and he seldom plays a piece the same way twice.

To close the first half of this recital was a well-known work of Liszt: "Après une lecture du Dante: Fantasia quasi sonata," from *Années de pèlerinage, deuxième année: Italie*, No. 7 (got all that?). In this music, Thibaudet continued to display his virtuosic technique, but that was beside the point: He made this piece as musical and coherent as

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possible. That which was demonic, was very demonic (this was Liszt, after all—and Dante!). That which was songful, was very songful. Thibaudet is a great—a historically great—colorist, but he owns a Lisztian technique. This is a one-two punch not often seen in a pianist, to put it mildly.

The second half was French, beginning with two pieces by Satie, the "Gnossienne" No. 7 and "The Dreamy Fish" (yes, you read that right). Thibaudet has recorded all of Satie, in a boxed set (for Decca). Satie has no better advocate. In the "Gnossienne," Thibaudet revealed marvelous intricacies and dissonances. In "The Dreamy Fish"—well, he was true to the title, if you can imagine. While swimming around, he demonstrated a fabulous sense of play.

The Debussy section consisted of the Three Etudes, three Préludes (from Book I), and the phenomenal *Isle joyeuse*. In the first of the Etudes—"Pour les degrés chromatiques"—Thibaudet was nimble and impish, and to the (famous) second—"Pour les arpèges composés"—he lent a delicious jazz touch. (Thibaudet, like many French classical musicians, is a jazzman.) The third of the Etudes, "Pour les octaves," is a big, involved affair, which Thibaudet dispatched with almost unseemly ease.

As for those Préludes, "Voiles" had its mystery, "Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest" had its fury, and "La Cathédrale engloutie" had its eerie timelessness. *L'Isle joyeuse*? It was infused with the pianist's intelligence, and it was also exceptionally clean. Thibaudet made sparing use of the pedal; hardly anything was blurred; yet everything was inarguably Impressionistic. In my view, the ending was a bit muted, too creamy, when it should have had a brilliance, a gleam—even a suggestion of Scriabin. But this is a trifle. You are lucky to hear such a distinguished piano recital once in five years.

Thibaudet played two encores, the first of which was dedicated to the memory of Robert Harth: It was Liszt's transcription of Wagner's "Liebestod," a transcription that some of us find insufferable, but that most people seem to adore. In any case, it was a lovely gesture, and the pianist did what he could with the thing. Then he closed with a little Duke Ellington, arranged by Dick Hyman. A man of parts, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, and a musical treasure of this age.

Concert note

Don Giovanni at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York

Mozart's *Don Giovanni* may be one of the handful of works vying for the "greatest" title—and certainly one which has been subject to reams of paper and gallons of ink. Nonetheless it is a difficult opera to bring off in performance, in part because of the nature of the story itself, and in part because of the demands Mozart puts upon the singers. For instance, is the fabled archetype a Latin Lothario long on charm, is he a stand-in for Satan himself, or is he merely your local variety of sadist/misogynist? Is the opera a dark tragedy, to be taken with the utmost seriousness, or is it a tragi-comedy that veers from one to the other during the course of the evening, or is it a buffo comedy with dark undertones? How should a repertory opera house, which will have to keep the production available for a generation, handle it?

In the event, the Metropolitan Opera opted for safety, and its new production (which I heard March 9), traffic-cop-directed by Marthe Keller, is generalized to the point of anonymity and will frighten no horses or operagoers.

Thomas Hampson as Giovanni, dressed in long black coat, white scarf, and a black fedora hat like some refugee from an opera house, possesses a solidly produced baritone and a quality of moving about with effortless aplomb, but his stage presence has always been short on the animal charisma necessary for the role, and his voice is short on honeyed, sexual persuasion. His Giovanni turns ugly and domineering by fits and starts and is otherwise bland. The one outstanding performance was given by the

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extraordinary René Pape as Leporello. Even though he may learn to deliver the Catalogue Aria with more nuance in the future, he nonetheless is already a Leporello of significant note, both vocally and histrionically, and more than a foil for Giovanni.

The women were problematic: a shrill and pitch-insecure Donna Anna of Anja Harteros (whose acting, when she realizes the identity of her father's murderer, is a striking and unfiltered example of the Theda Bara School), and a well (if forthrightly) sung Donna Elvira of Christine Goerke, but one that substituted loudness for intensity, and a sort of lumpish anger for the rage of a scorned woman. Gregory Turay's Ottavio was also well, if effortfully, sung. It was at least an interesting departure from the norm to cast the bumpkin Masetto (Ildar Abdrazakov) as a burly dock-wolloping lout, whom Zerlina (Hei-Kyung Hong) loves for his muscle rather than his brain, but in all cases one felt that only part of the stage-directing job had been done, and that a lot more hands-on shaping of character needed to be addressed.

Charm was another item missing from this production's agenda, with beetling gloomy sets of moving stone walls by Michael Yeargan. The visual approach would have worked more effectively if the entire production were death-haunted. But the huge spaces defined by the sets were rarely occupied with meaningful action, and the opera ran its course with predictability under the rather brisk, if again generalized, baton of James Levine.

Keller chose not to populate the end of the first act ball scene chez Giovanni with a horde of extras, which made the stage action clearer, but it also raised the question of why so few had appeared. Similarly, Keller deliberately underplayed the celebrated climactic scenes: the Commendatore (sung by Phillip Ens) is seen, or, more correctly, not seen by those in the orchestra seats, in effigy lying on his tomb; thus his eyes cannot drill Leporello nor his head be seen to nod. He appears, in the Supper Scene, behind a pier glass, like a mannequin in Saks's window and exactly as frightening, and when Giovanni is removed below, it is in a gentle snowstorm, not a firestorm. Café Momus, anyone?

The paucity of any kind of informed meditation on one of the central Western myths (and works of art) does, of course, avoid the gnashing abyss of the self-indulgent concept production, and it will last for years of revivals, but it also avoids having to deal with the vexing specifics of the opera at hand. What went on onstage, with whatever pluses and minuses of the singing, may have sufficed for some routine repertory performance. It did not confront—much less explicate—the stature of Mozart's opera.

—Patrick J. Smith

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The media

"Root-causeism" & electability

by James Bowman

The cliché of this primary season—and, like most clichés, it's probably true—is that the Democrats are fired up with hatred for and resentment against President Bush this election year. Or, in the jargon of the political professionals that is more and more to be found in ordinary news reports, the "base" is unusually "motivated" to work for the President's defeat. In fact, saying that the Democratic base is motivated has become a way of getting the base motivated. Exit polls from almost every primary election in February and March tell us that the prime consideration among the Democratic voters who chose John Kerry to be their standard bearer was that he was the candidate most likely to beat Bush in November. What Marjorie Williams of *The Washington Post*, a Kerry supporter, calls the "alarmingly tautological nature of John Kerry's victory" turns out to be an example of what Andrew Ferguson in *The Weekly Standard* called "the po-mo primary" in which "everybody was thinking like a pundit, especially voters." In citing his "electability," the Kerry voters "voted for someone because they thought voters would vote for him. It is second-order reasoning, a meta-rationale, a judgment about a judgment about a judgment. It will make your head hurt if you think about it too long."

Like the priesthood of all believers, the pundit-class of all voters is in one way a democratizing force which owes a lot to the blogosphere. It can hardly be a bad thing if it cuts into the monopoly exercised by media punditry as it is currently practiced. Yet that which above all else makes the quality of most commentary by newspaper and magazine columnists so poor is equally debilitating to the wit and the independence of the unpaid bloggers, and that is cheap sophistication. This is everywhere in the media today, both commercial and amateur, and is, I take it, what's really behind Mr. Ferguson's po-mo primaries. For to say that you're voting for someone because you think he's more electable is really to engage in a form of posturing. You assert what can only be a false sense of your own importance by affecting an attitude of power, like that of a party boss or kingmaker, or of knowledge, like that of a handler or a spin-doctor. How do you know that Mr. Kerry is more electable than Mr. Edwards or Mr. Dean? The answer is that you don't. But you've heard some media wise-man say so and it flatters you to associate yourself with someone who is paid to make such predictions—presumably on the basis of deep knowledge.

Of course it can never be anything more than an affectation. It is natural enough for the party bosses and the electoral technicians to think in this way about electability because they have a direct interest in acquiring power. It may be cynical but at least it makes sense to conclude that they have no policy but being returned to power, no interest in any candidate but the one

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most likely to effect that return. When Evelyn Waugh said that modern politicians did not seek power in order to implement policies but sought policies in order to attain power he at least proposed a rational if vicious state of mind on the part of those for whom power meant, if nothing else, the power of patronage. But what do ordinary Democratic voters stand to gain from adopting such an attitude—apart from the fact that it makes them feel wiser than they are, part of the circle of the initiate who know that this is the way the world *really* works? You'd think they'd feel ashamed to adopt such a cynical pose for such a small return. But then if there is no difference to speak of between the candidates and no return at all for paying close attention to their policy positions, you can begin to understand why they care so much about putting their man in power and so relatively little about what he may do when he gets there.

At any rate, for such people hatred of George W. Bush seems to have become its own justification. Some such reflection must have occurred to the British sociologist Frank Furedi when his eight-year-old son came home from school one day recently and said, "Daddy, I really hate Bush." When asked why he hated the American president, about whom he knew no more than most other British eight-year-olds, the boy replied, "Because he's so stupid." Obviously, the child had no first-hand evidence for this assertion, but he was clever enough to spot it for what it was: an expression of kind of tribal loyalty. Others that he admires and looks up to believe this, so he is happy to sign on to the belief himself. He has joined the club of the Bush-haters—who, he is probably old enough to realize, include most of the entertainment industry and others in the public eye whom his slightly older contemporaries regard as "cool."

And of course that kind of tribalism is exactly how politics in the entertainment industry works too. The anti-war activist and movie actor Sean Penn was apparently aware of no irony when he accepted this year's Academy Award for Best Actor by saying: "If there is one thing actors know—besides that there were no WMDs—there is no such thing as 'best' in acting." Could he really have been saying that all you needed to grasp what had escaped the attention of every intelligence service in the Western World, to say nothing of the United Nations, was to be an actor? I don't think that even an actor could have been *quite* as arrogant and stupid as that. What he really meant was more or less what Professor Furedi's son meant: namely, that all the cool people (like himself, by the way) hate Bush.

In Furedi's view, in an article written for www.spiked-online.com, his son's easily adopted hatred of Bush was a minor illustration of the larger social fact "that how you feel, rather than what you believe in, has become the defining feature of political protest." Clearly, he has a point there. The anti-globalization protestors, for instance, have no clearly defined program of action but only a vague sense of resentment against large corporations and government-sponsored agencies such as the IMF. But Furedi's interest is more in the protests against the war, especially those held in Britain, which were of a similar nature and pointed to the extent to which, he says, "protest has become a strikingly personal matter. It is about the protester as an individual, and says more about how he feels about himself than what he thinks of the issue at stake." Consequently, "it is difficult to define today's acts of protest as constituting a political movement. On the contrary: they are the product of a profound mood of political disengagement that afflicts most Western societies."

This mood of disengagement is not a political program or policy, but something more like an irritable gesture motivated by "cynicism, passivity and a sense of fatalism" against the idea of being included in someone else's program of action. Hence the ubiquitous slogan of the British war-protestors, "Not in my name."

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> "Not in my name" [writes Furedi] is self-consciously framed as a personal proclamation. It is not a political statement designed to involve others, and does not seek to offer an alternative. It does not call on anyone to choose sides or even insist on a particular course of action. Insofar as it represents an attitude, "Not in my name" is a statement of individual preference and represents an opt-out clause, rather than an attempt to alter the course of events. This is a shrug of the shoulder, which reflects a mood of general anti-engagement as much as it does a weariness towards war.

Indeed, Furedi goes so far as to conclude that "the personal presentation of anti-war sentiment contains an implicit renunciation of social activism and protest."

For such people, John Kerry is a natural, perhaps an inevitable candidate. He, too, says "Not in my name." He has no policy on terrorism save loud and repeated insistence that the Bush policy is wrong. When asked what he would do instead, he replies in essence that he would pretend that the events of September 11, 2001 never happened. Apart from some sort of expeditionary force to find and punish Osama bin Laden, he proposes that it is possible to stand down the military participation in the "war on terror"—with all that that suggests of the fears of another Vietnam which have haunted Kerry since he first came to national prominence thirty-three years ago as a spokesman for Vietnam Veterans Against the War—and go back to the pre-9/11 treatment of terrorism as a matter for the police. Like Howard Dean before him, he appeals to those whose sense of resentment is directed not at terrorists but at Bush and his allies for their unwelcome insistence that terrorism must be opposed militarily.

And here again, the problem of cheap sophistication rears its painted head. For the Democratic constituency—at least at its top, *New York Times*-reading, latté-drinking, NPR-listening end—is largely composed of the "root causes" school of politics. These are people who consider it proof of intelligence to treat as axiomatic the proposition that the real cause of all social evils, from drunkenness to murder to obesity, lie not with the behavior of the drunks, the murderers, or obese people, but in poverty, ignorance, large corporations, and George W. Bush. As it happens, last month the House of Representatives passed the hilariously named Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act, also known as the "cheeseburger bill," over substantial Democratic opposition, to grant immunity from liability to the fast food industry in the case of litigants seeking damages against it for having made them fat. "The food industry is under attack and in the cross hairs of the same trial lawyers who went after big tobacco," said the bill's sponsor. Still opposition was expected from Democratic heavyweights when it went to the Senate.

I have no space here to go into the question of the validity of root-causeism in all its various forms, but one thing should be perfectly obvious: it is the appeal of root-causeism to those whose sense of self is bound up with presenting themselves as being cleverer than their neighbors. Let's say, for example, those who vote on the basis of "electability." In the "Notes & Comments" section of last month's issue of *The New Criterion*, Professor Robert Brandon of the philosophy department of Duke University—and what could be cleverer than that?—was quoted as justifying his own, non-conservative views by asserting that John Stuart Mill (you may have heard of him) said that stupid people were mostly conservative. Of course, as our diarist pointed out, Mill never said anything so preposterous. But the professor of philosophy made the easy assumption of the would-be sophisticate that something Mill did say—namely that the nineteenth-century British Conservative party was, compared with the nineteenth-century Liberal party, "the stupid party"—amounted to the same thing.

For such people, root-causeism is a natural corollary of their own self-conceit as smarter than those they disagree with. Does

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one deal with crime by putting criminals in jail? Perish the thought! One deals with the *root causes* of crime by eradicating poverty and injustice so that there will be no more criminals. So it is too with terrorism. Once you get used to the idea that the root causes of terrorism are anything but terrorists, who knows where it will end? In a column in *The Washington Post*, for example, in which he took the Bush administration to task (yet again) for failing to prevent the 9/11 terror attacks, Richard Cohen recently wrote that, at the changeover between the Clinton and Bush administrations,

> Sandy Berger, the national security adviser under Bill Clinton, had told Condi Rice, the national security adviser under George W. Bush, that terrorism would be her No. 1 concern—and yet almost 3,000 lives were lost and a gash punched into the Pentagon and a hole left in the bottom of Manhattan Island. For this, somehow, *no one is at fault*. (emphasis added)

So natural is it for Cohen to think, insofar as you can call it thought, like other sophisticates in terms of root causes that he seems to have forgotten that it is even possible to think any other way. Or perhaps he considers himself *such* a sophisticate that he will not even deign to notice that the base vulgar in their primitive, Neanderthal way continue to suppose that it was the terrorist hijackers who were at fault. Oh, please! You'd have to be as stupid as George W. Bush to blame the actual terrorists for terrorism. If it were as simple as that, the whole of the punditocracy would be out of work and Democratic voters would have no one's example to look to as a guide in seeking out their most electable candidate.

Nor is it quite coincidental that electability for Democrats seems to depend on an often subtle but always firm endorsement of root-causeism, at least when it comes to terrorism. Joe Lieberman, the only candidate who was in favor of treating terrorists as a military threat to this country and not as a manifestation of failures by the Bush administration, never got more than about ten percent of the vote. And behind the rejection by John Kerry and the other candidates of most military options for dealing with the terrorist threat there lies the seductive Siren-song of root-causeism: if we're nice to the terrorists and show them we understand the reasons for their "anger," they'll leave us alone. The real fault-line in American politics lies between these sophisticates and root-causers who propose what is essentially a therapeutic model of international relations and the almost entirely inarticulate party of those who cling to an old-fashioned notion of honor among nations, namely that if one is hit one must hit back, or one will continue to be hit until one does.

On this, admittedly outmoded view, it's not even that important whom you hit. This, I believe, is what lies behind those stubborn majorities who keep insisting to pollsters that there is a connection between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. That, too, has a root cause in the view of the root-causers: namely the "lies" of the Bush administration—the root cause, after all, of most of the evils in the world. But what if such people mean something quite different from what is supposed? What if they don't care whether or not Saddam was in cahoots with the guys who knocked down the twin towers but remain firmly persuaded of another kind of "connection" between them—namely that if Saddam is whacked for 9/11, whether or not he had anything to do with it, it will give those who *did* have something to do with it something to think about? This may be how the "stupid party" thinks, but that in itself doesn't mean that it isn't a more effective way of dealing with terrorism than the smart people's solution of tightening up security even further and hoping that it will go away.

Unfortunately, there is a European version of root-causeism which strikes me as being a bit more plausible than the home-grown variety—and the results of the Spanish elections last month seem to sug-

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gest that it has the power to sweep all before it in a whole continent full of sophisticates. The terrorist outrage, seemingly by al Qaeda, in Madrid only three days before the election seems to have resulted in an electoral thrashing for the pro-American, pro-invasion of Iraq Popular Party because most Spaniards take John Kerry's view that American military intervention against terrorism is the root cause of terrorism. And even if it isn't, the safest course for Spain if she wants to get out of the line of terrorist fire is to disentangle herself from the U.S.-led anti-terrorism alliance. This last calculation is probably true too, at least in the short term—though that can hardly be much source of satisfaction to Kerry, whose answer to every question about terrorism involves increased international cooperation.

There is a certain irony, then, in Kerry's saying that "I've met with foreign leaders who can't go out and say this publicly. But, boy, they look at you and say: 'You've got to win this. You've got to beat this guy. We need a new policy.' Things like that." *The Wall Street Journal* and others have heaped scorn upon this claim, but I see no reason to doubt it. Certainly, it is beyond question that President Bush is not a popular figure anywhere in Europe. Yet if the sophisticated Europeans are whispering in the ear of Bush's rival, urging him to be as sophisticated as they—for which urging indeed there seems to be but little necessity—in discovering that the root causes of terrorism lie in President Bush's over-enthusiastic war on terrorism, it doesn't take any remarkable degree of brain-power to see what's in it for them. From their point of view, appeasing the terrorists might make sense, since it is not unreasonable to suppose that doing so will merely result in the terrorists' re-directing their energies towards specifically American targets. For Kerry, however, to present to the American people their disingenuous desire for "a new policy" as a reason for voting for him is astonishing. He must think we're stupid.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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Books

America—c'est moi! Alfred Kazin on American literature

by Hilton Kramer

"A wit said of Gibbon's autobiography," wrote Walter Bagehot, "that he did not know the difference between himself and the Roman Empire." Something similar may be said of the career that Alfred Kazin (1915–1998) devoted to the two subjects that were of obsessive interest to him: American literature and himself. What he wrote about Walt Whitman in *God and the American Writer* is indeed a key to the temper of his own literary oeuvre. "Whitman, after his best work was done," wrote Kazin, "never tired of summing up self and career, interpreting both in weary but friendly new perspectives. He never tired of self-portraits, especially when he discovered readers who thought him as wondrous as he did himself." Like the author of *Song of Myself*, though more prosaically, Kazin too "never tired of summing up self and career . . . especially when he discovered readers who thought him as wondrous as he did himself."

Some of Kazin's self-portraits are explicitly autobiographical—among them *A Walker in the City*, *New York Jew*, and *A Lifetime Burning in Every Moment*—while in other writings he includes himself in group portraits of American literary masters. For when one returns to his critical histories of American literature, beginning with *On Native Grounds* (1942) and ending with *God and the American Writer* (1988)—the working title of which, by the way, was *Absent Friends*—one comes to understand that these histories, too, are a species of autobiography. Indeed, with *God and the American Writer* the reader is sometimes left to wonder if Kazin was always able to distinguish his own role as a critic from that of the Almighty in the universe, so omniscient are his pronouncements on both life and art and so absolute are his political and social animosities.

He was nothing if not forthcoming about the "personal" character of his literary judgments. In an interview with Roger Bishop on the occasion of the publication of *A Lifetime Burning in Every Moment: From the Journals of Alfred Kazin*, in 1996, he came as close as he ever would in defining his critical response to literature:

> One of the things I discovered, to my surprise, in writing a book of literary criticism . . . was that I could think what I really wanted to say about William James or Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman by first writing in my journals as if I were writing about a personal experience. That helped me to write about these people—I hope I did—as personal experience.

The great advantage of this "personal" style of critical discourse lies, of course, in its affectation of intimacy with the reader, a strategy that allows the critic to bare his soul, or at least his soulfulness, no matter what his ostensible subject may be.

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This is its downside as well, for the soulfulness of the critic, all too often, is projected onto the writers under discussion. Thus, when Kazin concludes an account of Emily Dickinson's poetry by observing that "We have a sense of the human soul stretched to the farthest, of valor encompassing the most that it can know," it does indeed sound more like a journal entry, of interest mainly to and about the critic himself, than an exegesis of an actual poem. As a critical observation, it is something that could be said of so many poets that it doesn't take the reader very far in distinguishing Dickinson's special quality. For that, alas, there is no substitute for the kind of "close reading" that Kazin never tired of castigating in his many attacks on the New Criticism, which, as we all know, was more concerned with the words on the page than with the state of the critic's soul.

In writing about the new anthology of his critical and personal writings that Ted Solotaroff has now assembled in *Alfred Kazin's America*, I am obliged, however, to declare an interest—or rather, an absence of disinterestedness.[1] For while Kazin and I were acquainted with each other over the course of many years and had many friends (and ex-friends) in common, and I have more than once over the years had occasion to praise one or another of his early books—my praise for *A Walker in the City*, written many years ago, is featured on the cover of the latest paperback edition of that book—we were never friendly with each other.

It may be that Kazin was initially put off by my New England accent—I was born and raised in Massachusetts—and for that reason regarded me as insufficiently Jewish. This, for Kazin, was a matter not easily forgiven. (If you doubt it, take a look at his assault on Lionel Trilling in *New York Jew*.) For my part, I felt a deep distaste for the narcissism, self-dramatization, and sentimentality that became more and more pronounced in his later writings. Only once did we ever have a serious conversation, and that was by chance. Kazin was then teaching at Amherst College, and on one of his trips to New York we ran into each other at the Century Club, where we were both members. It was in the middle of an afternoon, and there were scarcely any other members present. Kazin looked so distraught on that occasion that I invited him to have a drink, which he eagerly agreed to.

It turned out that at Amherst that morning he had discovered that there were undergraduates in his class who had scarcely any idea of who Adolf Hitler was—a less common phenomenon then than it would be today. He was beside himself with what can only be described as grief as a result of that experience. I was pretty upset myself when he told me the story, but Alfred was clearly suffering, and so I sat with him, drinking and talking, or rather listening, until it was time for him to leave. The next time he saw me at the Century, he avoided me.

I cannot say that I was shocked by this snub, for by that time I had written some pieces for *Commentary* and other publications that were bound to incur Kazin's wrath. The issue was politics, of course. In Alfred Kazin's America, any intellectual suspected of conservative sympathies was regarded with a contempt that bordered on paranoia, and the contempt was compounded into an intense loathing if the malefactor in question was a Jew. Jews, in Kazin's conception of the moral universe, were expected to uphold the pieties of the political Left as an inviolable creed. Above all, they were forbidden to traffic with the conservative enemy. It was all a ghastly parody of a religious tradition that condemned sinners as "unclean."

It therefore comes as no surprise to me to discover that in compiling *Alfred Kazin's America*, Mr. Solotaroff has felt it appropriate to include several pages that vilify me as well as *The New Criterion*. In this

1 *Alfred Kazin's America: Critical and Personal Writings*, by Alfred Kazin, edited by Ted Solotaroff; HarperCollins, 592 pages, $29.95.

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respect, the editor of *Alfred Kazin's America* has been completely faithful to Kazin's dearest convictions, which, it has to be said, were a little nutty on the subject of Jewish conservatives. For at one time or another Kazin's roster of despised defectors from the liberal faith has included Saul Bellow, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Allan Bloom, Edward Shils, Irving Kristol, Joseph Epstein, Midge Decter, Norman Podhoretz, and virtually the entire Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. This strikes me as distinguished company, and I am flattered to be included among them.

It must also be acknowledged that *The New Criterion* has not been laggard either in criticizing Kazin as a critic and historian of American literature or in responding to his attacks on our journal and its contributors. This critique of Kazin began with a review of the fortieth anniversary edition of *On Native Grounds* in the first year of our publication, in May 1983, by Kenneth S. Lynn, author of studies of Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and other American subjects. About Kazin's treatment of two writers--Hemingway and Faulkner—Lynn was particularly devastating. In excruciating detail, Lynn compiled an anthology of factual and interpretive errors in the section devoted to Hemingway. These extended even to a complete ignorance of the northern Michigan landscape that is so central to Hemingway's early stories as well as the political slant Kazin had appropriated from Malcolm Cowley in his portrait of Hemingway. "Even though Kazin did not like Cowley as a person," Lynn wrote, "he was so enraptured by *Exile's Return* that in a key chapter of his own book called 'Into the Thirties: All the Lost Generations' he seems to have simply rewritten the Cowley line in more operatic language."

It was in his account of Faulkner, however, that Kazin exhibited an abject ignorance. As Kenneth Lynn wrote:

> Faulkner is a writer who is so "regional" that he is "almost parochial." He has "essentially a boyish mind." The "antics and institutions" of the South excite in him "a lazily humorous disgust" that is "often indistinguishable from cynical acquiescence." His work does not spring "from a conscious and procreative criticism of society or conduct or tradition." The great "problem" of his writing is "its lack of a center." In sum, Faulkner's "corn-fed, tobacco-drooling phantoms are not the constituents of a representative American epic, protagonists in a great modern tragedy."

In later years, to be sure, Kazin acknowledged that he had been been "frightened" by Faulkner when he first encountered his work in the 1930s, and in later accounts of Faulkner he was nothing if not fulsome in his praise of the writer. What Kazin could never bring himself to acknowledge, however, was that his criticism of Faulkner, just like his criticism of Hemingway, derived in large part from the Communist Party line on these writers in the years that Kazin was writing *On Native Grounds*. On the contrary, as late as 1994, in his Harvard lectures called *Writing Was Everything*, he boasted that "I have never recovered from the Thirties or wanted to."

Moreover, Kazin's paranoia on the subject of Jews, conservatism, and *The New Criterion* developed into something really ugly as he grew older. In our issue for April 1986, we published a long review of Irving Howe's *The American Newness: Culture and Politics in the Age of Emerson*. Howe, the founding editor of the magazine *Dissent*, was, of course, another apostle of the socialist creed who never recovered from the Thirties—that "low, dishonest decade," as W. H. Auden correctly described it in his poem "September 1, 1939"—or wanted to. The reviewer was the late James W. Tuttleton, an eminent scholar of American literature who served for many years on the faculty of New York University. His principal criticism was that Howe had made a complete muddle of Emerson's political views.

> Strangely, Howe ignores Emerson's essay

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> "Politics" altogether. Perhaps the reason is not far to seek. In "Politics" Emerson is quite straight-forward in claiming for government the function of protecting the rights of private property. Democracy may be "better for us," but that is only "because the religious sentiment of the present time accords better with it." Emerson is in fact fundamentally skeptical of politics, of political parties, and of the claims for the centrality of the state. . . . Irving Howe never grapples directly with the central formulation of Emerson's political thought.

In response to this criticism of Howe, Kazin promptly attacked Tuttleton in the pages of *Dissent* accusing him—of all things—of anti-Semitic motives by suggesting that Tuttleton "no doubt has his private reasons for snapping at Jews." This was truly an outrage, based on nothing but political spite, and for me it destroyed whatever respect I may still have harbored for Kazin as an honorable man of letters. It also casts some doubt on the reliability of Mr. Solotaroff's introduction to *Alfred Kazin's America* in which it is unequivocally stated that "Kazin refrained from joining the saving remnant of [socialism] around Irving Howe's *Dissent*." Needless to say, there is no reference to Kazin's smear in Mr. Solotaroff's introduction nor to Mr. Tuttleton's response to it in *The New Criterion* for December 1987, for the author of that introduction remains one of those "readers who thought [Kazin] as wondrous as he did himself."

As seen on TV

Todd Oppenheimer The Flickering Mind: The False Promise of Technology in the Classroom and How Learning Can Be Saved. Random House, 481 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Remember the digital divide, the alarm spread by the White House, governors, and advocacy groups in the mid-1990s? The advent of the Internet created fabulous wealth, mingled tech savvy with bobo lifestyles, and sparked visions of anti-authoritarian commerce in an age of instant data and personal empowerment. But it never takes long for anything to acquire a race/class consequence. The downside, President Clinton and others warned: not everyone was connecting. Minority and underprivileged households weren't going online at the rate of white and middleclass households, and, because of the acceleration of skills and knowledge enabled by the Web, black and brown kids in particular were falling further and further behind. What seemed so promising, in fact, aggravated income disparities and social injustice.

The solution was clear: more computers in classrooms, more wiring in schools. Amidst prophecies of how computers would reshape human intelligence and cure education's ills, in the 1990s states spent $70 billion on computer-related programs. In a race for the cutting edge, districts took pride in conspicuous consumption. Union City, California, spent $37 million on computers in 1996 and $5 million more in 2001 for only eleven schools. Oliver High in Pittsburgh created $1,300 workstations outfitted with Dell computers, scanners, and digital cameras. The shortfalls of recent years forced some hard choices, but the fervor didn't subside. I.S. 275 (a middle school in Harlem) earmarked only $4,200 for books in 2002, but $350,000 for computers. Administrators in Mansfield, Massachusetts dropped teaching lines in art, music, and physical education, but saved $333,000 for online access. Kittredge Elementary in Los Angeles dropped its entire music program in 1996 to hire a tech specialist. In the school budget for New York City, computer spending rose from $19.7 million in 1997 to $118 million in 2000. A $406 million deficit in 2001 killed afterschool and arts programs, but didn't touch $250 million for technology. (Keep these numbers in mind when districts complain that they have no money to implement No Child Left Behind.)

The Flickering Mind is the journalist Todd

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Oppenheimer's 450-page survey of what resulted. That sounds like a straightforward issue—What did students learn?—but anyone experienced in the workings of the public school system knows that blank questions and answers quickly dissipate. From the direct evidence of the classroom, one slides into a Gordian machinery of administrators, school boards, state offices, ed. schools, ed. theory, teachers' unions, the textbook business, parent groups, and a rout of entrepreneurs trying to work the system.

Oppenheimer reverses the process. He relates all the hype, money, politicking, and promises of digital learning, interviews tech moguls and gurus, and talks to teachers fired up and disappointed with hi-tech tools. But the key reportage begins with firsthand reports of what he saw and heard at ground level. In hundreds of classrooms, the student reality belied the teacher/administrator/techie claims. Oppenheimer explains, "First I would follow the teacher as he or she perused the class. Then I would walk the room by myself. In virtually every computerized classroom, the differences between what the teacher saw and what I saw on my own were so dramatic that it was sometimes hard to keep from laughing." Under one teacher's eye, students do spread sheets and download articles, but a second pass by Oppenheimer shows them checking out the website of the Dallas Cowboys. Technophiles praise the group interactivity of computer projects, but Oppenheimer observes rooms of twenty heads each sunk in a screen of their own, silent and otherworldly. Advocates insist that computers foster literacy, but one student reveals the actual process. Oppenheimer reports:

> Henry told me about the way they're using laptops to do research on the Internet in social studies classes. 'You don't have to read it or anything like if you looked it up in a book. All you have to do is use your fingers and just look.' What did he do when he found sections he wanted to include in his written report? That's one of the best parts: He simply hit select and copy commands, pasted it into his own file, then reworked a little of the language to put it in his own words.

The depravities multiply. Student-centered approaches maintain that the computer motivates students to "learn to learn" (a progressivist byword). But in one exercise in which seniors used the Internet to investigate and present a libel case involving a newspaper ad, a student in the audience "asks what the original ad . . . actually said. 'I don't know,' Peter [the presenter] says. 'We weren't given the ad.'" Computer learning, we're told, lifts self-esteem, but what Oppenheimer beholds is a false sense of accomplishment, as with the student who built a Web project filled with thin platitudes about simulation games, while her website registered tidbits of self-approval such as "I think I demonstrate a lot of critical thinking." Of the teachers who notice the lazy habits of computer-learning, some have returned to books and blackboards, but others shrug them off as the mores of the Information Age. Why worry about basic numeracy skills, one argues, when computers execute them for us and we can graduate to higher tasks? Ultimately, a slogan of New Tech High in Napa, California, affirms, "It doesn't matter what you know. It matters what you show."

Oppenheimer's portraits provide anecdotal support for what the test scores say. Despite billions in education funding since the landmark 1983 report "A Nation at Risk," most students fall short of grade-level math and reading standards, and their historical knowledge is abysmal. Technophiles peg computers as the answer, but they have yet to prove it. Oppenheimer documents one school-improvement-by-technology program after another that produce little or no progress in student learning. Steve Jobs, who led the charge for wiring schools, now admits that "what's wrong with education cannot be fixed with technology. No amount of technology will

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make a dent." Lev Gonick, a distance learning leader at Case Western Reserve, sighs, "The truth is that e-learning technology itself, and those of us who represent the e-learning environment, have thus far failed."

But the bandwagon rolls on. Too many taxpayer funds await a school savior, and no industry embraces the new with such ardor and abandons the tried-and-failed with such reluctance as the education system. Politicians with an eye to glory know that putting a laptop on every desk looks better than good books and back-to-basics instruction. In the New Economy, too many "e-lusions" (Oppenheimer's coinage) circulate without question, the main one being that computers are always the solution, never the problem. A 2003 report by The National Commission on Writing, "The Neglected 'R': The Need for a Writing Revolution," documents the poor quality of writing by high school graduates, then calls for "a National Educational Technology Trust to finance hardware, software, and training for every student and teacher in the nation."

The Flickering Mind uncovers the waste and credulousness, but what should replace digital learning isn't so clear. Oppenheimer bypasses the issue of school choice, disdains standardized tests, and favors multicultural curricula and progressivist pedagogies even though both partner well with the very practices he abhors in the computer lab. Indeed, in his occasional praise of experimental learning environments, Oppenheimer seems unaware that progressivist ideas dominate most schools and share the blame for sliding student achievement. But these are minor themes in the book and shouldn't distract from the central exposé. The school system has become a contest pitting skeptics such as Oppenheimer against software firms, gullible politicians, Internet addicts, overworked and remiss teachers, and slacker students. The latter have the money and the *Zeitgeist* on their side, but the former have the discouraging facts.

Race: no such thing

Vincent Sarich & Frank Miele
Race: The Reality of Human Differences.
Westview Press, 320 pages, $27.50

reviewed by Paul R. Gross

What response would you get were you to ask almost any college student or member of the current, self-identified American intelligentsia, "What is this society's most serious problem?" Almost certainly, a large proportion of your eligible interviewees would give this answer without hesitation: "Race!" But here is an oddity: The same interviewees who answer your question with "Race!" will assure you, also without hesitation, that there is no such thing. They will maintain that for humans the concept of "race" is meaningless: that there are no biologically significant human group differences, hence no human races.

This is a public catechism: it is recited regularly, with conviction and feeling, in the media and in the social sciences. The *au courant*, including well-known scientists and a good many official voices of science, insist that race is—speaking of biology or genetics—a recent illusion, fostered by European imperialism and triumphalism. If pushed, most respondents will try to invoke some authority on this, although of course the vast majority has not understood or even heard of the relevant science. The reference is usually to "modern biology." Or, if the respondents have actually read some popular writing on the subject (or watched *The Power of an Illusion*, the much admired 2003 PBS documentary), they will appeal to some such visible scientific name as "Gould" or "Lewontin," or to one of the leaders of the Human Genome Project, or to a science journalist at, say, *The New York Times*.

Why then do governments set so bad an example? Why do they appear to insist that race *does* exist—as evidenced by the requirement that we specify, *inter alia*, our race (choose one of three? of nine? of seventeen?) in responding to the census-taker, or

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when completing an application for admission, bidding for a contract, being tested for a job? The answer you get, if you get one at all, will take this form: "Well, there *is* no such thing as race. We're all the same, and the little differences in various competences noted among us are due to upbringing, lifestyle, unequal social services, and the like. The differences we see are no more than skin deep; any difference we can measure is socially constructed. *But*: bad people argue that we are *not* all the same. Therefore we must assemble and keep data and records on this false category—race—so as to defeat the racists and to undo the social evils they propagate."

Did you follow that? If not, not to worry. That explanation is incoherent. There has long been the need for a scientifically reliable, accessible trade book on the biology and anthropology of human differences, on what the research actually says about them so far: about group variations in human genetics, morphology, and physiological function—and how those variations, such as they are, must have arisen in the course of our species history. An epitome thereof is what Vincent Sarich, a biochemist and anthropologist, and Frank Miele, a senior editor at *Skeptic*, set out to produce in their compact volume *Race*.

About the relevant qualifications of this pair there is no doubt. Miele is an able editor of *Skeptic*, Michael Shermer's literate journal investigating the phenomena of belief and of controversial claims on science, consciousness, and physical and social reality. Sarich, a professor of anthropology at Berkeley, was one of those young turks associated with the distinguished Berkeley biochemist Allan Wilson, who, forty years ago, first applied the then new molecular-level understanding of genetic change over time—the "molecular clock"—to the problems of primate classification and evolutionary history. They attacked the problem of genetic relationships and the timing of speciation among the apes (including us). Sarich contributed to the eventual recognition of the close relationship between gorillas, chimpanzees, and humans, and, more importantly, of the genetic difference—the genetic "distance"—separating these species. Such a distance translates directly to a time of evolutionary separation. This work, expanded and refined in succeeding decades by the explosion of new methods in molecular genetics, especially the shift from studies of protein polymorphisms to direct study of the genes, established the chimps as our closest relatives and the age of our own lineage at not more than five million years.

"Race" is a word used widely and traditionally in biology to identify subpopulations *within* a species, that is, varieties, extended families, fuzzy subsets of individuals of common descent, sets more or less differentiable one from the other by appearance and/or behavior. It is no surprise that races or recognizable varieties in other species turn out to be distinguishable—although not necessarily easily—at the level of genetics. To put this another way: obvious external differences among the races of a plant or animal species turn out to result from genetic differences, although those can sometimes be subtle. But of course this *must* be so! For a race or variety to persist in time, its obvious distinguishing traits must be to some significant extent *heritable*. And if heritable, the traits must reside ultimately in genes (or more likely) in combinations of genes. "Traits" are the products of gene sets —genomes—acting in particular environments over particular life histories.

The book's title announces that Sarich and Miele recognize human group differences, and that however fuzzy these sets may be, they are still sufficiently stable as biological subpopulations, varieties, extended families, and "races" to be identified as such. Which word one uses doesn't matter: the physical reality does. They argue that the recognition of group differences, of races, among humans is very ancient, a cognitive capability (i.e., *not* an invention of capitalism or colonialism, as is claimed by all politically correct commentators), of a

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piece with other category-making competences we share. The burden of the book's central scientific sections is that those differences have a highly plausible evolutionary (and therefore genetic, biological) basis. Far from minimizing the significance of group differences, the relatively short history of our species implies that they must have been very strongly selected for in the several different environments in which our ancestors first flourished. None of which, as the authors insist (perhaps in vain) is any excuse for racism or racial discrimination.

It is not hard to predict the response to this book, not just the general response, but the scientific, technical one. For here, as in no other domain of contemporary science except, perhaps, in global climate research, political correctness reigns. There will be denunciations of Sarich and Miele; it has already begun. The general-professional weekly magazine *Nature*, based in London, is one of the two world-class journals of its kind (the other is *Science*, based in Washington). *Nature* commissioned a review from the leftish historian Robert N. Proctor, who relates the argument of this book, at gratuitous length, to questions of racial injustice. He connects, and thereby dismisses, its claim for the reality of race to the works of such often abused "raciologists" as Arthur R. Jensen and J. Philippe Rushton (with whose work in fact this book has very little to do). He describes the case made by Sarich and Miele as "an exercise in bombast and overstatement"; and, remarkably for this distinguished science magazine, he offers no analysis of the scientific arguments that are the core of the book.

But in *Race*, those arguments do lead with hard, new, molecular-genetic data to a general conclusion. Here is a recent, independent statement of it:

> [W]hen the taxonomic term [race] is used consistently across species, it's difficult to see any justification for the common assertion that human races are merely 'social constructs.' The motivation behind the assertion is a positive one, but denying biological realities at the outset is unlikely to lead to productive social dialogue on coping with human differences.[1]

There is no bombast in *Race*. It is an effort to define for the general reader, in broadest terms, those features of human genetics and anthropology testifying to a surprisingly recent origin of our lineage, but also to a long interval (before the present) of sufficient geographic separation of human subpopulations to have given rise to the currently recognizable races. The message is the opposite of typology: among the races of man, now that we can move freely over the planet and because we *are* a single species, able to interbreed, differences will become steadily less marked, the sets fuzzier. Eventually, in a distant future, they will disappear. Barring world-wide catastrophe, the prospects for re-segregation and new raciation are nil. But the differences acquired in our evolutionary history haven't disappeared *yet*. I know of no other popular work that makes this scientific case so simply and places it so clearly in social context as *Race*.

Would that it had been better edited! The publisher seems not to have invested much effort in bringing the separate contributions of the co-authors into tonal consonance. And the courageous decision on the part of the authors to publish such a book would have justified filling out and documenting more fully the core scientific argument. It is perfectly sound so far as it goes, but nevertheless sketchier than it needed to be given the commitment to book-length exposition. Still, the primary literature is available for those who care and know how to examine it. The best summary of its conclusions is like the one quoted above: Human subpopulations are "races"; they exist. They are familial subdivisions of the one species, *Homo sapiens*, to which we all belong. General readers who wish to be informed on the biology of race, in prepara-

1 This is from the conclusion of the July, 2002 essay by J. Goodrum. See http://www.goodrumj.com/RFaqHTML.html

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tion for the next official hyperventilation on the subject, will do well to start with this book.

The political person

Susan Braudy Family Circle: The Boudins and the Aristocracy of the Left. Knopf, 496 pages, $27.95

reviewed by Paul Hollander

Much remains to be learned about the origins of political fanaticism, the connections between consuming resentment and the taking of radical political positions, perverted idealism and political violence. More specifically, it is still not well understood what precisely were the sources of the hostility and anger directed at American society by many of its most privileged members in recent times.

In this long, well written, and generally well documented volume, Susan Braudy does not provide us with any particularly keen insights about these matters. She neglects to back up some of her more piquant assertions with evidence from interviews or printed sources. Nonetheless, she offers a great deal of specific and suggestive information about the individuals whose lives she chronicles. Anybody interested in the psychology of the radical groups of the 1960s (mainly the Weathermen) and the affinity between utopian good intentions and unappealing outcomes will find this book enlightening. *Family Circle* illuminates the pathology of the violence-prone, young white radicals and the psychological deformations associated with their strenuous quest for uniting the personal and the political aspects of their lives. In the event, they felt their goals could only be accomplished by subordinating the personal to the political goals they pursued.

Kathy Boudin, whose life is the focus of this study, was a key figure in the group of radicals who eventually succeeded in embodying everything that was wrong with the ideas, animating spirit, and actions of the radical protest movements and groups of the 1960s.

It does not take long for the reader to reach the conclusion that the righteous indignation over the Vietnam war, racism, and the assorted inequalities of American society do not fully or satisfactorily explain the anger and behavior of these young people. It is hardly surprising that the combination of their "intense, irrational moral fervor" and fierce hatred culminated in a joyous embrace of violence and in reverence for those most adept at practicing it.

A partial explanation of the beliefs and behavior of these people may be found in their family backgrounds. Many of them, including Kathy Boudin, were "red diaper babies." That is to say, they came from families with well-established leftist credentials and grew up in subcultures supportive of such beliefs. Leonard Boudin, Kathy's father, was a famous lawyer who could never turn down a defendant who demonstrated his or her hostility toward American society, capitalism, or U.S. foreign policy. His clients included Judith Coplon, Daniel Ellsberg, the Berrigan brothers, Fidel Castro, the Chilean government under Allende, and the Socialist Workers Party. He was also a compulsive womanizer and egomaniac, facts not irrelevant to the quality of his marriage and relationship with his daughter.

Kathy's mother was "a self-described parlor revolutionary," and her aunt was married to I. F. Stone, an iconic figure of the left. Growing up, Kathy Boudin rubbed shoulders with Angela Davis, the Rosenberg sons, Paul Robeson, and many other distinguished members of the adversary culture. From an early age she imbibed a taken-for-granted estrangement from mainstream America. (But to illustrate the limitation of such "nurture" explanations, her brother, raised by the same parents in the same environment, became a conservative lawyer, defender of big corporations, and later an appeal's court judge appointed by Bush senior.)

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An important element in Kathy Boudin's story, according to Braudy, was her ambivalent and politically competitive relationship with her father which propelled her into political extremism. Braudy believes that Boudin's radical activism was motivated by both an effort to attract her father's attention and a wish to embarrass him. In her opinion he did not go far enough in his radicalism, limiting himself to the legal game.

Kathy Boudin easily found congenial friends and comrades-in-arms in school and college; it was not difficult to connect with young people of similar background and disposition. Rejection of the status quo was in the air but few went as far as she and her fellow radicals in the Weather Underground. It was a group that may also be characterized as suffering from a false consciousness of massive proportions. Thus, according to Braudy,

> she claimed to see her birth to a family of well-to-do whites as an agonizing defect to be obliterated by rationalization, violence and self-deprivation. Kathy wanted above all somehow to discipline her mind and body into being a member of the black working class.

Bill Ayers (another prominent radical and friend of Kathy Boudin) revealed in his memoirs similar wishful fantasies of being or becoming black. David Gilbert, Kathy Boudin's fellow conspirator and the father of her child, wanted to gain the respect of young blacks by "transform[ing] himself into a street tough." Testifying to similar aspirations, Kathy Boudin and "Das" (another radical) "named themselves the Americong, seeking a name as hostile and heavy as 'Black Panthers.'" Kathy and David Gilbert named their son Chesa Jackson in honor of George Jackson, the murderous Black Panther killed while trying to shoot his way out of prison, "Chesa" is a Swahili word meaning "dancer," but it "also had an underground meaning: it evoked Joanne Chesimard, A.K.A. Assata Shakur in whose honor the baby was conceived." (Chesimard was a charter member of the so-called Black Liberation Army "dedicated to killing policemen" in "revolutionary executions." She escaped from prison with the help of the Weather Underground and found safe haven in Cuba.) Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn (another leader of the Weather Underground) named their son after Zayd Malik Shakur, a member of the same Black Liberation Army.

Notwithstanding their self-proclaimed identity as liberated women, Kathy and her fellow feminists "believed [that] they must play subservient roles [to Blacks]. . . . Thus they followed orders, renting and driving getaway cars for Family robberies. . . . The women were not disturbed by Family members' use of heavy drugs." They also resolutely overlooked the fact that the violence of the Black Liberation Army and the Black Panthers—violence supposedly inspired by a higher purpose—degenerated into ordinary criminality.

The abject admiration and reverence for tough Blacks and the Vietcong were rooted in dispositions only marginally political. These groups symbolized daring, defiance, strength, and authenticity—attitudes, postures, and ways of life diametrically opposed to everything the white radicals perceived to be characteristic of American society and often of their parents as well. It was their defining obsession to become tough enough to belong to a select revolutionary vanguard:

> they added to nearly all comments the word *fuck*, aggressive black street slang, and harsh code words for police and other middle-class villains. . . . Kathy and her friends were trying desperately to make themselves into warriors. This they hoped to accomplish by rooting out of their personality any feelings that smacked of attachment to "the sick bourgeois society." They were trying to replace old habits with programed anger. . . . [T]hey were now strictly enforcing group sex as well as homosexuality to "smash monogamy." . . . Rigid rules were meant to force each person to discard much of his individual will, his personality. Nobody had his or her own bed or possessions [in the un-

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> derground commune]. . . . No pets were allowed; they elicited affection, which led to vulnerability. . . . Das cooked and ate an alley cat to prove she was overcoming bourgeois ways.

They also engaged in relentless criticism and self-criticism sessions during which "each member revealed his own bourgeois inadequacies and accused others. They were terrified of harboring a fear of violence or feelings of loyalty or love for a mate . . . . Kathy and other core members of the Weather group clung to their identity as terrorists." It was precisely these attitudes—the cult of toughness, the experience of violence as liberating, the fierce hatred of the "pigs"—that point to murky emotional-personal undercurrents that had a questionable connection with the grand social-political agenda.

For Kathy "each of the bombings was a roller coaster of pure terror followed by ecstatic relief when a bomb went off on schedule and without human injury. It was addictive." Such concern for human lives was absent during the Brinks hold-up in 1981 (which claimed three victims and led to her imprisonment) and when anti-personnel bombs, assembled by her comrades-in-arms in a New York townhouse, blew up earlier than intended.

The Weather radicals, although far more extreme than their old-left forebears, received moral support from them. As the cliché of the times had it, "their hearts were in the right place." I. F. Stone spoke for many on the Left when he wrote:

> The Weathermen kids can be seen as distraught children or spoiled brats in a tantrum with a world that will not change overnight. But they are the most sensitive of a generation which feels in its bones what we older people only grasp as an unreal abstraction, that the world is headed for nuclear annihilation and something must be done stop it.

Of all the excuses for the radical-left violence of the period, this was the most lame and unconvincing.

The old left-liberal sympathy for these violent radicals was further conveyed when (after the murderous the Brinks robbery) "well-known and illustrious visitors . . . trooped to five different prisons includ[ing] Dr. Ben Spock, Dave Dellinger, Noam Chomsky, and Philip Berrigan" to convey their solidarity to the imprisoned. A similar group of older leftists published a letter protesting Kathy Boudin's treatment.

Family background, family conflicts, and a privileged social position were among the main ingredients of the attitudes examined in *Family Circle*. There was also the sense of entitlement (exemplified by Kathy Boudin's many complaints about the restrictions and inconveniences of life in prison) paradoxically combined with a vocal rejection of the privileges with which they grew up. "Inauthenticity"—in the ways of life of their family, class, and in American society at large—was another major preoccupation. As had many utopians before them, the Weathermen entertained highly unrealistic expectations about the imminent revolutionary transformation of society expunging from it all injustice, deprivation, and disharmony.

Problems of identity loomed large among these idealistic and privileged youth. They disdained conventional careers and the expectations of their parents. Their inchoate personal ambitions and diffuse but intensely felt grievances found expression in political extremism. In a peculiarly contradictory fashion, they longed for both an authentic, freely chosen community *and* the pursuit of heroic, individualistic self-assertion. To compensate for class guilt they desperately and grotesquely sought to identify with and imitate the real underdogs: blacks, Vietcong, Latin American peasants, and guerillas. The venerable American quest for self-realization thus became thoroughly politicized. For a while they seemed to succeed, illustrating what stupendous folly struggling for the unity of the personal and political begets.

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Guilty as charged

David Fromkin
Europe's Last Summer:
Who Started the Great War in 1914?
Alfred A. Knopf, 349 pages, $26.95

reviewed by Robert Messenger

I write you under the black cloud of portentous events on this side of the world, horrible, unspeakable, iniquitous things—I mean horrors of war criminally, infamously precipitated.
—Henry James, August 6, 1914

Who started the Great War in 1914? David Fromkin's excellent new book wants to put the question to rest. This work, from the author of the bestselling *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (1989), makes three important claims, aimed at a general audience, about the lead-up to the Great War:

First, that Europe in 1914 was not some peaceful Eden. Rather, "as its political elites recognized, Europe was in the grip of an unprecedented arms race; internally the powers were victims of violent social, industrial, and political strife; and general staffs chattered constantly, not about whether there would be war, but where and when." All the European nations perceived themselves in weakness—economically, politically, militarily, or demographically—and both Britain and Germany, fearing a change in the balance of power more than they feared being drawn into war, acted at times to shore up a weaker partner. Perception and reality diverged for the decision-makers of Europe in the early twentieth century. War and political violence were still very much the norm. Honor played an important role for those who controlled policy. It was an explosive and dangerous mix.

Second, Germany sought and orchestrated the commencement of a whole-European war. Kaiser Wilhelm and Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg devised Austria's strategy toward Serbia. When this failed, the military chiefs, Helmuth von Moltke and Erich von Falkenhayn, took over and insisted on war, not just against Serbia and Russia, but on France, and the Great General Staff (*Grosser Generalstab*) maintained that France must be defeated first in a lightning strike through Belgium. The documentary evidence shows that Germany encouraged Austria-Hungary's hopes while actively deceiving the governments of Russia, France, and Great Britain. The pattern of deception is remarkable, with senior military and civilian figures lying to the Kaiser to ensure that he could not opt for peace. The day-to-day manipulation of events still reads like a thriller, with your suspicions of guilt constantly hopping from character to character.

Third, there were two separate wars being planned and declared. Austria-Hungary sought a localized war against Serbia, whom she wished to crush without interference from Russia. Germany sought a war to defeat Russia, her future rival for mastery of Europe, but the immediate goal was to have Austria-Hungary fight off Russia while Germany defeated France in the West.

Austria-Hungary sought a Third Balkan War; Germany sought a First World War. Moreover, the larger war did not grow from the smaller one getting out of hand. They were differently conceived, differently motivated, but both relentlessly pursued. The little war was put aside when the big war came. Mr. Fromkin stresses that the Austro-Hungarian plan for dealing with Serbia originated in a memo that was being drafted weeks before the assassinations in Sarajevo. The death of the heir apparent was an opportunity to settle Balkan questions, not the motivation to settle them.

Thus, the First World War was caused by a German desire to settle the mastery of Europe. Russia needed to be defeated, as Austria had been in 1866 and France in 1871. The German government and the Great General Staff had been preparing for it for more than a quarter of a century. They

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hoped that a victorious war would also be a cathartic national event uniting the classes and the many regions of the empire. This young nation had industrialized rapidly, and the rising urban classes were seen as a threat. Germany's ultra-conservative political and military leaders feared an evolution toward some sort of constitutional monarchy.

Wilhelm II had been only thirty when he came to the throne in 1888, and it had been hoped that he would be the outward representation of a new, enterprising nation. But Wilhelm was a capricious monarch and given to indecision and contradictory attitudes. In 1890, he dismissed Otto von Bismarck as chancellor and set in motion the events that left Germany isolated diplomatically. The reinsurance treaty with Russia was allowed to lapse. This Bismarck creation had been designed to keep Russia and France apart, so Germany would be free of ever having to fight a war on two fronts.

Germany alienated Great Britain with its naval ambitions. The goal was not naval supremacy, but rather the creation of a popular imperial rule. It was felt that if Wilhelm oversaw the rise of Germany's navy and its use to build and maintain a colonial empire, then Germans would rally behind him. Instead, the naval building program only succeeded in draining the budget, irritating Britain, and inaugurating history's first arms race. The Moroccan crises of 1905 and 1911 convinced the German government that Great Britain and France would always conspire against German ambitions and that Austria-Hungary could not be relied upon. The government saw Russia's recovery from 1905, with an industrial leap funded by France, as another threat.

In short, Germany's leaders felt surrounded politically, endangered economically—thanks to a lack of colonies and labor strife—and threatened militarily by the rise of Russia with its huge population. Only war could unite the country and maintain Germany's great power position. The calculations were partly correct. The war did unify the German people behind the Kaiser, but Germany lost in the end, and all was swept away.

The question of August 1914 then is not "Why war?" but "Why now?" Peace had prevailed in each of the three previous years in equally difficult diplomatic circumstances. The answer has been a source of much controversy, with the rise and fall of two main hypotheses that I will call Collective Guilt and the Fischer Thesis. While there was plenty of wartime propaganda about who was to blame for starting the war, this debate essentially began at the Versailles Conference with the inclusion of Article 231—the "War Guilt Clause"—in the Treaty of Versailles, signed June 28, 1919. Germany admitted to responsibility of the monetary costs to the Allies "as a consequence of the war imposed on them by the aggression of Germany and her allies," and so had to pay vast reparations. The clause was as much about money as guilt. From the start, Germany wanted to escape the monetary and cultural burden.

Revisionism began early, in December 1919, with the German government publishing four volumes of official papers, carefully edited and selected to exonerate Germany. In the 1920s, the fighting powers brought out hundreds of volumes of official documents to show they were blameless and had nothing to hide. In the words of Lloyd George: "the nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without a trace of apprehension or dismay." A consensus arose that guilt was collective to all.

After World War II, when the harshness of the Versailles Treaty was cited as a key factor in the rise of Hitler, the idea of Collective Guilt became almost law. The first challenge to this had actually been published during the war, but in Italian, and so it lacked wide dissemination until the 1950s. Luigi Albertini's three-volume *Origins of the First World War* was the product of ten years of interviews and dusty research. A minor politician and sometime journalist, Albertini went to great lengths to interview

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all the surviving players of the July Crisis and to sort through all the dissembling. His book is a compendium of source material and a diligent attempt to ask and answer the questions. The fact that he was Italian was also a help. He had no national position to defend and so presented one of the very few dispassionate accounts of the coming of war. Albertini's work little affected the scholarly consensus, however, which had been reaffirmed by historians from all the belligerents at conferences in the early 1950s. Gerhard Ritter in 1950, at the first meeting of the West German historians' association, noted "the victory of Germany's main theses" in the international historical debates after 1918 as one of the great achievements of German historiography.

It was Fritz Fischer who sucessfully challenged this orthodoxy in 1961 with his *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (called more prosaically *Germany's Aims in the First World War* when it was translated into English in 1967). He ignited one of the great scholarly battles of the last century. Having plowed through a vast amount of documents—on both sides of the Berlin Wall; Fischer was the first Western scholar allowed in the archives in East Germany—he presented a wealth of evidence that Germany's military and civilian leaders actively sought war in 1914 and so bore the majority of the blame. Fischer was saying, essentially, that the long discredited Article 231 had been right.

He was attacked not only by the scholars, but also by large parts of West German society. The president of the Bundestag denounced him in a speech in 1964, and Franz Josef Strauss—the strong man of Bavarian politics—called on the West German government to devote its resources to refuting this "distortion of Germany history and of the image of Germany today."[1] The government went so far as to try to get Fischer's American lecture tour cancelled by withdrawing funds from the Goethe Institut, which was supporting it.

It now seems obvious that the debate was driven by political as well as historical concerns. The Collective Guilt theory that had been reaffirmed by historians across Europe after World War II fit the new realities of the Cold War. The Western powers wanted to arm West Germany as part of an "Atlantic Alliance" against the Soviet Union. Separating Germany from the excesses of Nazism—dividing Wilhelmine from Hitlerine—and establishing that Hitler was an aberration in German history was part of the rehabilitation of a former enemy. Fischer, meanwhile, maintained that German history from 1871 to 1945 could be viewed as a continuum. Fischer's book appeared in 1961 at the beginning of a decade of youth rebellion. Fischer, through no fault of his own, found himself in favor with the generation that came of age in the 1960s who thought nothing could be better than apportioning blame for the twentieth century's calamities on their parents, teachers, and politicians.

The Fischer Thesis needed much honing, and the debate set scholars and publishers to work. Fischer's first book was about Germany's war aims *during* World War I. It wasn't until 1969's *Krieg der Illusionen* ("War of Illusions") that he dealt with the run-up to the war. It was here that the evidence was overwhelming. It shows that Germany's leaders were prepared for what followed: that they had calculated how to get Austria-Hungary to fight Russia rather than Serbia, were happy to cause a world war to be able to fight Russia on the terms they wanted, and expected Britain to enter the war after the invasion of Belgium. The scholars who have continued Fischer's work don't all agree by any means—there is much argument over whether foreign or domestic policy concerns played the dominant role in the decision to fight—but historians like

1 This quote is drawn from Annika Mombauer's *Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus* (2002), which is a superb short study of the long-running debate on war guilt. John Langdon's *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1918–1990* (1991) is another useful survey.

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Imanuel Geiss, Samuel R. Williamson, Zara Steiner, and Volker Berghahn have taken the framework of Fischer's thesis and fleshed it out. What we believe today is not specifically the same as what Fischer indicated in the 1960s, but he was dead right in the essentials.

The interpretive controversies remain, and worthwhile studies appear almost every year. John Keiger's 1997 biography of Raymond Poincaré—written in English—was the first to draw on Poincaré's private papers. Annika Mombauer's research on the chief of the Great General Staff between 1906 and 1914—published in 2001 as *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War*—has caused a general rethinking of Moltke's character and actions. He now comes across as the key advocate of going to war in August 1914, where before he was seen as indecisive. On a similar note, Terence Zuber's 2002 *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning, 1871–1914* has thrown all sense of just what is meant by that phrase into question. John C. G. Röhl's exhaustive biographical study of Wilhelm II remains an ongoing project, with a volume, not the last, due this summer.

Still, this scholarly ferment has had little impact on popular perception; World War I remains a great unavoidable accident in the media. The view is also still widely held among political scientists. In his *Diplomacy*, from just ten years ago, Henry Kissinger perpetuated the Collective Guilt canard in a chapter that claims that all would be well if diplomats had control of military chiefs: "Since the military plans depended on speed and the diplomatic machinery was geared to its traditional leisurely pace, it became impossible to disentangle the crisis under intense time pressure." The July Crisis lasted more than a month, hardly a rush. The analysis is based on the faulty assumption that war occurred because of mobilization schedules. Even Kissinger has not kept up with the latest research.

Mr. Fromkin has sorted through a tremendous amount of the material published in the forty years since Fischer proposed his thesis. He presents the evidence in a more lucid and compelling way than I have ever come across. It not a long book: one hundred pages set the scene of European power politics, fifty pages narrate the assassination, one hundred describe the four quiet weeks that followed and then count down the feverish ten days that led to war, and a fifty-page analysis of the evidence and its lessons brings the book to a close. The brevity is welcome. The book reminds me of the essays of Macaulay, those long essays he did for the *Edinburgh Review* smoothly surveying the available material on a historical subject and fearlessly laying out an interpretation. *Europe's Last Summer* never bogs down, covers the ground, and makes its points. It is also charmingly written.

Mr. Fromkin evokes place well:

> It looks very much as though the drift toward war began, insofar as any movement in history *has* a beginning, in the old imperial city of Constantinople: yesterday's Byzantium and today's Istanbul. Dominating the straits that separate Europe from Asia, it occupies a site that has been at the center of world politics since the fabled, and perhaps fabulous, Agamemnon, Ulysses, and Achilles embarked for nearby Troy. For more than a thousand years after the fourth century A.D., Constantinople had served as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. For five hundred years afterwards it was the capital of the Ottoman (or Turkish) Empire. It had outlived two civilizations and in the early 1900s seemed poised to outlive a third.

He is also adept at defining our players:

> A new Chancellor took office, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, a civil servant, but of an old and wealthy Rhineland family. Bethmann knew he was not Wilhelm's preferred choice for the office, and his willingness to stand up to the Kaiser was questioned then and is questioned still. Bethmann was an outsider—not Prussian, not military—who did not have, nor did he ever develop, personal relationships

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with the leaders of the armed forces or with the emperor.

He has the revealing anecdote:

President Poincaré of France was at the Longchamps racetrack when news of the Sarajevo killings was brought to him. He remained to see the end of the races. He then went about his usual routine. Paris was unaffected.

And the telling fact:

To add to the murkiness, there was no agreement on what constitutes a nationality. The 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* calls it a "vague term" and remarked that "a 'nationality' . . . represents a common feeling and an organized claim rather than distinct attributes which can be comprised in a strict definition."

Finally, Mr. Fromkin understands that the Great War was not just about economic forces, nihilism, or the machinations of the Zeitgeist; it was about high politics, "who should rule the world."

> The decision for war in 1914 was purposeful; and war itself was not, as generations of historians have taught, meaningless. On the contrary, it was fought to decide the essential questions in international politics: who would achieve mastery in Europe, and therefore in the world, and under the banners of what faith.

I could quote at great length from this fine book, but my point is that *Europe's Last Summer* is an excellent addition to the history shelves. We badly need general history books that translate the best of our scholarship for popular consumption. I can only hope that it will be a success and prompt other such books.

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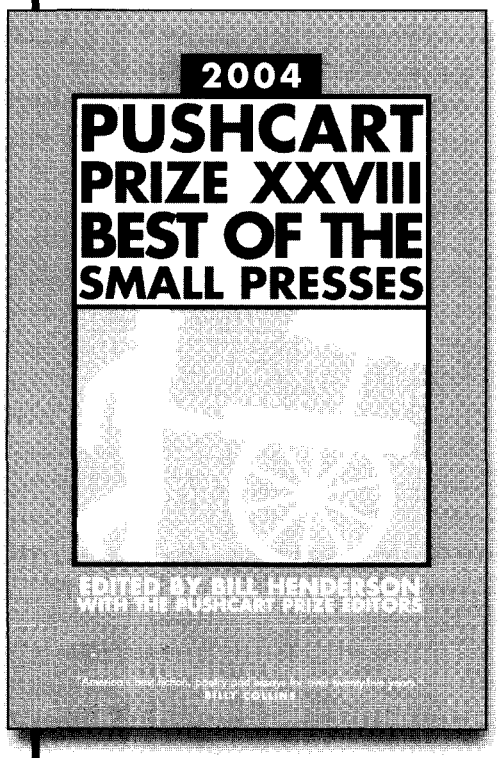

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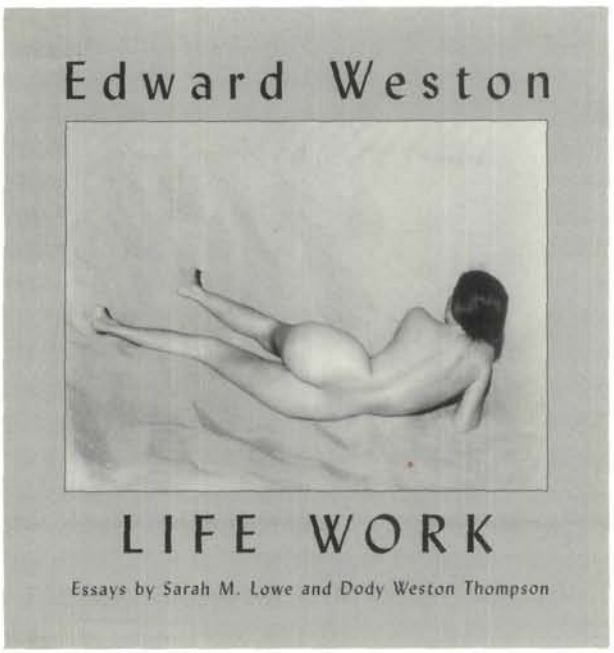

Published on the occasion of a major traveling exhibition, *Edward Weston: Life Work* is a 110-photograph survey of this great American artist. This book contains photographs from all phases of Weston's long and varied career, from his first nude in 1909 to his final landscape at Point Lobos, California, in 1948. Previously unpublished masterpieces are interspersed with his well-known signature images.

A series of essays by Sarah M. Lowe illuminates each phase of Weston's *oeuvre*. A first-hand remembrance by Dody Weston Thompson, Weston's last assistant, gives the reader an in-depth look at Edward Weston the man, as well as insightful writing about his photographs.

Over two years in the making, *Edward Weston: Life Work* will soon be released. Never before have Weston's photographs been reproduced with such fidelity to his originals. For those who have not had the opportunity to see original prints by Edward Weston, but who know his photographs only through reproduction, this book will come as a revelation. In keeping with Weston's adherence to the contact print, the photographs are reproduced actual size, and on two different paper stocks and multiple ink colors to reflect Weston's choice of papers and finish. Printed in Belgium by SALTO2 in a combination of 600-line screen quadtone and tri-tone plus two-color for Weston's early platinum prints, *Edward Weston: Life Work* is a landmark in the publishing of fine-art photography books.

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For a limited time, the publisher is offering a pre-publication discount on this extraordinary book for only $95. In addition, during the pre-publication period (until April 30th), shipping will be free (in the US). After that time, *Edward Weston: Life Work* will sell for $125 plus shipping.

A "must-have" book for every photography lover's library.

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